
The Beacon

Guiding You Through the Process of Change

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“Be Comfortable in Your Genes”

This is the slogan for National Eating Disorders Awareness week, which begins on February 24th and is sponsored by the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA). The message focuses on the fact that body shape and size are strongly influenced by biological factors, while also calling attention to the new information regarding the role of genetics in the development of eating disorders. Ironically, this event comes on the heels of the post-holiday season, when we are bombarded with media stories about various approaches to weight loss. For the millions of people struggling with eating disorders, and the many more with sub-clinical eating habits, this can be an especially difficult time of year.

Some quick definitions:

- *Anorexia Nervosa* is characterized by extremely restrictive eating and excessive weight loss.
- *Bulimia Nervosa* involves a secretive cycle of binge eating and purging
- *Compulsive Overeating/Binge Eating Disorder* is characterized by periods of uncontrolled, impulsive or continuous eating well beyond fullness.
- *Sub-clinical Disordered Eating* occurs when attitudes about eating and/or weight lead to rigid, obsessive or secretive habits that impair health or happiness.

Some quick statistics:

- 4 out of 10 Americans either have struggled or know someone who has struggled with an eating disorder.
- Up to 80% of women are dissatisfied with their appearance.
- 42% of first to third grade girls want to be thinner.
- Over 1/2 of teenage girls and 1/3 of teenage boys use unhealthy weight control behaviors.

- 95% of dieters will regain their lost weight in 1 to 5 years

Many factors combine to cause eating disorders. Susceptible individuals tend to be perfectionistic or rigid in their thinking. They often have low self-esteem, difficulty expressing feelings and a perceived lack of control over their lives. Depression, anxiety or a history of abuse may be contributing conditions. Eating disorders frequently develop in a context of troubled family or personal relationships. The larger societal context is also relevant, with its narrow definition of beauty and fixation on thinness as a means to success and happiness. However, biological factors are increasingly believed to make a significant contribution to the development of eating disorders along with environmental factors. A frequently offered explanation of the relationship between biological and situational factors is that genetics ‘loads the gun’ while environment ‘pulls the trigger’.

Eating disorders are serious illnesses, frequently minimized or misunderstood. The harmful behaviors may appear to be about food but actually are about much more, such as attempting to cope with overwhelming or painful emotions or providing illusory control over aspects of one’s life. Ultimately, the behaviors can ravage the person’s physical and emotional health. In the most severe form of the disease, individuals are engaged, literally and figuratively, in the fight of their lives.

Depending on the severity of the illness, treatment for eating disorders can take place in an outpatient, day treatment, or residential facility. The clinical team may include an individual therapist, a family therapist, a nutritionist, a physician and a psychiatrist. It truly is helpful for the person with the illness if family and friends are educated about and sensitive to the complexities and challenges of the condition, and receive support to help them cope as needed.

See www.nationaleatingdisorders.org for additional general information.

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