

for your information

What Causes Eating Disorders?

Many teenagers believe that dieting is the normal way to eat. Every magazine, billboard, movie, television show and commercial seems to send a message that happiness is being thin. According to these messages, being thin also leads to success, self-confidence and respect.

People with eating disorders believe these messages. They spend much of their time and energy thinking about what they eat and how they look. They focus on their appearance and don't develop their confidence and abilities in other areas.

Psychological Factors

People who have eating disorders work hard to prove that they are good enough, because they're afraid they aren't. They are competitive and ambitious. They want to be perfect. They seem to think: If I am thin, I will be happy, popular, successful and self-confident.

Family Problems

Teens with eating disorders may be afraid to grow up and leave the safety of school and their families. Some teens use eating disorders as an excuse to remain dependent on their parents. Others use their unusual food behaviors as a way to assert their independence and rebel against family standards.

An eating disorder can be a symbolic protest against parents who the teen may think are too strict. In some families, the teen feels he or she has to take care of the parents, and does not want this unfair responsibility.

Lifestyle Factors

People with eating disorders may not be very assertive. They usually don't handle stress well. They don't have important goals that can help them feel independent and self-confident. They may have friends who are also very concerned about physical

appearance and thinness. Some occupations or careers are associated with an extreme emphasis on appearance and/or weight control. Many dancers, actresses, models, gymnasts, flight attendants, sorority members and jockeys have eating disorders.

Biological Factors

There may be biological reasons that make some people more likely than others to develop an eating disorder. They may be related to people who are alcoholic or depressed or both. People with certain types of eating disorders may also abuse alcohol and other drugs.

Dieting or limiting your eating over a long period of time can cause the body processes to be out of balance. These changes in the body can lead to eating disorders. Most of the physical problems are results, not causes, of eating disorders.

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Poor nutrition causes changes in the way the body uses calories from food. These changes make it hard to lose weight and easy to gain. The frustration this causes can lead people to overeat (binge), then try to get rid of the food by vomiting (purging). These behaviors can make the problem even worse.

Triggers

Many of the factors that contribute to eating disorders can exist for years before anything happens. Then something may set off a cycle of strict dieting or bingeing and purging. The event that sets off this cycle is called a *trigger*.

Trigger incidents are problems a person is not prepared to handle. Triggers can include losses such as death, divorce or leaving home; school pressures; a long-distance move; or the break-up of an important relationship. Many teens with eating disorders report that teasing from their peers or other comments about their bodies made

them think they were fat and needed to diet.

Many people with eating disorders are also victims of rape, incest, molestation, verbal abuse and neglect. Because they don't know how to express their fear, rage, confusion and need for help, they turn to or away from food. They may use food for comfort, or they may go on strict diets to help them feel in control of something in their lives.