

**May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2013**

### **About Eating Disorders**

*Sarah has always struggled with her eating, but things have gotten even worse lately. She doesn't join her friends when they go out to dinner. She spends time thinking about food and how she would feel pressured to eat around her friends. Sarah has reduced her eating to under 500 calories a day, works out at the fitness center for several hours daily and has recently begun taking laxatives to help speed up her weight loss.*

The scenario described above is both common and troubling. College students are particularly prone to eating disorders as the mean age of onset of eating disorders is during the traditional college-aged years. The college years can be an exciting time of new opportunities and increased freedom. However, this transition can also present some challenges. In addition to balancing classes, residential life and social activities, one challenge of college life is assuming more responsibility for eating habits, including making choices in the dining and residence halls and deciding if and when to eat in the midst of a busy schedule.

Many students feel challenged by their busy college schedules and the college environment in general. For those predisposed to developing an eating disorder, too many challenges lead students to feel they are not in control of themselves and their environment, triggering a desire to exert control over food. Preoccupation with food and body image can also serve as a distraction from difficult feelings.

Sometimes a specific event may trigger the initial onset of eating disorder symptoms (e.g. a diet that gets "out of control," leaving home, a breakup, a negative comment about one's weight, family problems). Other times, an eating disorder may be a chronic condition that remains a concern from high school or college and continues to be a concern later in life.

### **What's the big deal? Are eating disorders really all that serious?**

Yes, eating disorders are a very serious issue. Over five million Americans suffer from eating disorders, and over 90% of them are women. One in ten of those suffering from anorexia will die from the effects of starvation, including cardiac arrest or suicide. There can be other lifelong negative consequences from eating disorders, including stomach ulcers, eroded tooth enamel, osteoporosis, compromised digestive functioning and reduced fertility.

### **How can I tell if I have an Eating Disorder?**

Although many individuals worry about food and body image, there are specific criteria used by mental health professionals to diagnose an eating disorder. The best way to assess an eating disorder is through an intake interview with a counselor or psychologist who has training in this area.

#### **Anorexia:**

- Refusal to maintain body weight at or above a minimally normal weight for age and height
- Intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat
- Distorted body image, undue influence of body weight or shape on self-evaluation, or the denial of the seriousness of low body weight

- Amenorrhea in women (absence of at least three consecutive menstrual cycles)

### **Bulimia:**

- Recurrent episodes of binge eating
- Recurrent use of laxatives, diuretics, enemas, fasting or excessive exercise to prevent weight gain
- Self-evaluation unduly influenced by body shape and weight

### **Disordered Eating**

Another type of eating problem, which may not reach the level of a full-fledged eating disorder, is a pattern of disordered eating. This can involve a preoccupation with food and a history of up and down weight loss and yo-yo-like dieting. Some people may become unable to focus at work or on their friendships because of their thoughts about food and what they will and will not eat.

### **How do I know if I need help?**

Warning signs include:

- Binge eating, purging and/or strict dieting
- Obsessive preoccupation with food or body image
- Compulsive exercising
- Inability to stop eating
- Secretiveness or shame about eating
- Social isolation, low self-esteem or depression

### **Where can I get help?**

Therapists and psychologists provide professional and confidential counseling for eating disorders. They can also help with referrals for more intensive treatment.

*Tip of the Week authored by Brian Van Brunt, Ed.D., SCOPE President & Senior Vice President for Professional Program Development, The NCHERM Group, LLC. [brian@wearescope.org](mailto:brian@wearescope.org)*

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