

Eating Disorders



Educating Yourself for the Battle

by Kathy Sapp

It is a common scene: A young woman at a health club looks at herself in the mirror and thinks, "I'm so fat!" Or, an aspiring athlete thinks, "*maybe* if I lose a few more pounds I'll make the team!" To other people, however, they look very thin. And, yet, being extremely thin is not always a sign of someone who has an eating disorder; sometimes the signs are much more subtle. Each year millions of people of all shapes and sizes develop serious and life-threatening eating disorders in an effort to measure up to the "perfect body" image.

Maybe you, or someone you know, have starved yourself in an effort to drop a few pounds. Or, maybe you have exercised excessively to get your body toned. Maybe after a big meal you have made yourself throw up—or felt the urge to do so. It might be nothing, but then again, it could be a symptom of an eating disorder. Approximately 90 percent of people with eating disorders are adolescent and young adult women, especially vulnerable because of their

tendency to go on strict diets in an effort to achieve an "ideal" figure.

Anorexia Nervosa

People who deliberately starve themselves suffer from an eating disorder called anorexia nervosa. An individual with anorexia nervosa refuses to maintain appropriate body weight for age and height or fails to make the expected weight gain during a growth period, leading to a body weight that is at least 15 percent below what is expected. There is an intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat, and food and weight become obsessions. There may be strange eating rituals or a refusal to eat in front of others and there may be strict adherence to an exercise regimen to keep off weight.

Bulimia Nervosa

An individual with bulimia nervosa will "binge" or consume large amounts of food in a short period of time and then purge the excess calories by self-induced

vomiting, excessive use of laxatives, strict diets, and/or vigorous exercise. There is a feeling of being out of control during a binge, and there is a persistent overconcern with body weight and shape. People suffering from bulimia may often successfully hide their problem from others because they may binge and purge in secret and maintain a normal or above average body weight. Frequency of binges and purges may range from once a week to several times a day. Dieting between binges is also common. It is common for people with anorexia to develop bulimia.

Binge Eating Disorder

Like bulimia, binge eating disorder is characterized by episodes of uncontrolled eating. However, sufferers of this disorder do not purge their bodies of the excess food. Persons with binge eating disorder feel that they lose control of themselves when eating. Large quantities of food are consumed, and they do not stop until they are uncomfortably full. They

have a difficult time losing weight and keeping it off, and most people with the disorder are obese and have a history of weight fluctuations.

Medical Complications

The medical consequences of an eating disorder can be severe, with approximately ten percent of the cases resulting in death. Side effects of eating disorders are damage to the heart, changes in menstrual cycle, seizures, muscle cramping and irregular heart rhythm, erosion of teeth and gums, kidney problems, intestinal ulcers, constipation, deteriorating hair and nail quality, fatigue, interruption of sleep patterns, skin rash or dry skin, memory loss, slowness of thought, moodiness, and depression.

Treatment

Eating disorders are treated most successfully when they are diagnosed early. The longer the abnormal eating behaviors persist, the harder it becomes to overcome the disorder and its effects on the

body. Unfortunately, many people deny that they have a problem or think that they can simply stop on their own. Friends and family members can help recognize the problem and encourage the person to seek help. The risk is too great and the price is too high to ignore the problem or pretend it is not there.

Recovery from an eating disorder requires honesty, courage, and perseverance. Freedom from an eating disorder does not come through will-power and self-control. Because eating disorders are rooted in the emotions, professional help is usually needed. Treatment may require hospitalization until the body is functioning properly and the person is out of immediate danger. Outpatient therapy, group therapy, and family therapy are also recommended. The path to recovery is not easy or short, and it requires that you have a reason to live. God can fill that need and provide you with a sense of worth and the satisfaction of fulfilling His plan for you.

If you think you have an eating disorder, talk with your physician about appropriate treatment steps.

©**Kathy Sapp, MA.Ed.**, is a guidance counselor at Calvary Baptist Day School, Winston Salem, N.C.