

Disordered eating

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Rare eating disorders, like Anorexia Athletica, or Compulsive Exercising, can negatively impact a person's life, but may not be immediately recognizable as a problem. (Shutterstock.com)

You've heard of eating disorders, such as Bulimia and Anorexia Nervosa. But something you may not know about - and should - is disordered eating.

Chew and Spit, Anorexia Athletica, Bigorexia, and Orthorexia are not clinically recognized diagnoses, but they can have harmful implications. Though not medical terms, they are writers' terms -- many of whom are the men, women, boys and girls, who deal with these issues everyday.

Merryl Bear is the director of the National Eating Disorder Information Centre. She explains that disordered eating or behaviours are not choices; they are necessities based on compulsive attitudes, fueled by emotional desires.

"They may have negative consequences for the individual, and are likely to be maintained out of a need to soothe self, blunt emotion, regulate emotion, and feel something of achievement and efficacy."

According to Bear, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, a need to be accepted, other existing psychological illness, or an inability to cope with emotions, are all the same as the physical dangers and complications associated with having an eating disorder.

Ultimately, disordered eating or activities may be symptoms of eating disorders or borderline behaviours.

These behaviours can interfere with work, school, the ability to socialize, and one's potential. They can also become part of an identity that individuals feel set them apart, create creating difficulties with relationships.

Of note, these issues can all lead to malnutrition and various health problems.

So, with the help of Bear and NEDIC, here are some forms of disordered eating and activities that you should know about:

Chew and Spit - This is when copious amounts of food are chewed and spit out before swallowing to avoid calories and guilt. Though it may sound like the best of both worlds, it's not. Its secretive nature and wastefulness can generate greater guilt, and result in gum and tooth erosion, jaw problems, mouth sores, and digestive tract troubles.

Anorexia Athletica (Compulsive Exercising) - This is an obligation to exercise that cannot be stopped, where rigorous activity consumes hours each day. Of equal concern for males and females, it's similar to Bulimia, in that it can be a way to "purge." Constant exercising does not allow the body to heal, and often the over-expenditure of calories may not be compensated. Although this can damage the body, compulsive exercisers will insist it's healthy.

When physical activity becomes such a demand that one will lose all sense of control without it, and become overwhelmed with fear and anxiety, it needs to be addressed. People who suffer from this can be anxious about food too. Some problems it can lead to include injury, crankiness, depression, and muscle loss.

Bigorexia (Muscle Dysmorphia) - Societal pressures for the ideal body affects men too. Bigorexia is the obsession to increase muscle mass, whether someone is weak or tremendously muscular. Also called "reverse Anorexia," this grips mostly men who worry more about body fat versus muscle percentage than weight.

From obsessive high-protein diets, to compulsive weightlifting, to constant body checks, and dangerous anabolic steroids, those with this type of body dysmorphia will sacrifice their emotional and physical lives to achieve an appearance that they will never find adequate. Some will even avoid sex with their partner to have enough energy for a workout.

Orthorexia Nervosa - Equally a male-female problem, the term is derived from the Greek "ortho," which means "right" and "orexia" meaning appetite. An Orthorexic is consumed with eating only healthy foods, according to their own definitions. As such, their diet may lack nutrients and calories.

Beyond the typical health nut, people with this obsession find total control in their diet, while deviating results in total guilt and turmoil. Because this compulsion has a socially acceptable mask, especially with all the heightened media attention to eating healthfully, it can be easy to hide.

In the end, Bear says, "It would be a real loss for the individual to lose these behaviours and scary to give up something that has meaning and purpose in his or her life, even if to us there's no meaning or purpose."

Just know, eating disorders and disordered eating cross all demographics. They don't happen overnight and cannot be resolved overnight. But, there is help.

If you think you may have a problem, Merryll Bear of NEDIC recommends asking yourself these questions:

How do these behaviours impact my life?

How do they help me?

How do they hurt me?

In looking at how they help me, is that true help?

Is there something more productive I can do in helping me achieve what I want to achieve?

Is it genuinely not interfering with my ability to live a full and engaged life?

If you need help, or know someone who may, please contact the National Eating Disorder Information Centre.

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