Eating Disorders: Myth or Fact?

Myth or Fact?

Eating disorders are caused by preoccupation with food and weight.

Myth. Eating disorders are complex conditions that arise from a combination of long-standing behavioral, emotional, psychological, interpersonal, social and biological factors. While eating disorders may begin with preoccupations with food and weight, they are about much more than food. A common reason eating disordered individuals later give for beginning these behaviors is that at one point in time, they felt out of control, whether this was something they were feeling inside themselves or something that was happening to them from their outside environment. Dieting, binging, and purging may begin as a way to cope with painful emotions to feel in control of one’s life, but ultimately, these behaviors will damage a person’s physical and emotional health, self-esteem and sense of competence and control.

Only females have eating disorders.

Myth. Although eating disorders do occur primarily in females, they are increasingly common in males and especially in male athletes. Approximately 10% of eating disordered individuals who come to the attention of mental health professionals are male. Males may constitute as many as 25% of those exhibiting binge-eating disorders. Presently we don’t know if eating disorders are increasing in men or if we are becoming more aware of them.

Men in Western societies have been exposed through the media to an increasingly lean and muscular male body idea. A study done by Pope et al (2000) found that men from Austria, France, and the United States indicated that they would like, and believed that women would prefer, a body with at least twenty-seven pounds more muscle then they actually had. By contrast, women indicated they preferred an average looking male body.

Women of color are protected from eating disorders.

Myth. In the U.S., Caucasian women are at greater risk for the development of eating disorders than are the women of other ethnic groups because of accepted norms of “beauty”. However, there are a growing number of Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American people reporting eating disorders.

It has been speculated that women of color have fewer eating disorders because their cultural identity provides some protection against body image disturbances. For example, African American women have been described as having more positive body image and a greater acceptance of a larger body size. Although African American women are less likely to have eating disorders compared with Caucasian women, this does not mean they are protected from eating disorder symptoms or body image pressures. Preliminary research indicates African American women may be more prone to a binge eating disorder which is a subtype of eating disorder.
There is some evidence that highly acculturated women are more vulnerable to eating disorders. Researchers have suggested that if or when, persons of different racial groups internalize Caucasian norms of thinness the ideal, then greater degrees of disordered eating and body dissatisfaction emerge. Thus, socio-cultural factors that may impact women of color include patterns of acculturation, assimilation and immigration and effects of oppression and ethnic identity. However, just as eating disorders have varying etiologies in Caucasian women, the same applies to women of color.

The college environment contributes to eating concerns.

Fact. College women 18-22 years have higher rates of bulimia than those females younger, not in college, or over 21 (Whitaker, 1989). Aspects of the college environment that contribute to the development of eating disorders include:

- A way of coping with stress associated with the transition to college and the expectations for this new environment... or the stress of impending college graduation and the changes inherent in that transition.
- Academic and financial stress
- Certain majors and career choices which emphasize health and fitness may reinforce distorted views about eating and weight.
- Participation in sports where weight and appearance are perceived to affect success.
- Belief that appearance is the key to success in attracting potential dating partners
- Fear of gaining the dreaded “freshman 15” pounds

Definition of Terms

**Anorexia nervosa** is characterized by an individual’s refusal to maintain a minimally normal weight, an intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat, and significant disturbance in the perception of the shape or size of his or her body.

**Bulimia nervosa** is characterized by recurrent episodes of binge eating followed by purging: self-induced vomiting, fasting, excessive exercising, or the use of laxatives and diuretics. Self-evaluation is excessively influenced by the body shape and weight.

**Binge-eating disorder** is characterized by recurrent episodes of binge eating (excessive eating with a feeling that one is out of control) but without the purging behaviors.

**Disordered eating** can be characterized by chronic dieting, obsessions with food and weight, or negative self-image. It can be an acute response to life situations or a habit, can lead to weight changes and nutritional problems, but rarely leads to severe medical or emotional problems.

Prevalence

- It is estimated that more than five million Americans have eating disorders.
- An estimated 1,000 women die each year of anorexia. Many of these deaths are related to malnutrition, sudden heart attack, and suicide.
Eating Disorders and Their Precursors

Body Dissatisfaction: The drive for thinness

- 4 out of 5 American women are dissatisfied with their appearance;
- 4 out of 5 children age 10 are afraid of being fat.
- 45% of healthy weight women and 23% of healthy weight men describe themselves as overweight.
- For adolescent girls, weight and self-esteem are closely linked. While boys identify a broad range of characteristics when asked to describe themselves, girls focus on weight and shape as the primary ingredients in their self-assessment.

Dieting

- 91% of women surveyed on a college campus had attempted to control their weight through dieting, 22% dieted “often” or “always”.
- A study found that 81% of ten-year-olds reported that they had dieted at least once.
- Americans spend over $40 billion on dieting and diet-related products.
- 95% of dieters will regain their lost weight in 1-5 years.

References:


