

Effects of eating disorders



Believed to be affecting over 30 million American citizens and over 70 million people worldwide, eating disorders have claimed the lives of thousands of people each year, destroying families and leaving those left behind feeling empty and helpless. While eating disorders are classified as mental illnesses and have always been around, they've been more prevalent in the past 20 years than ever before and continue to take over lives daily.

With the rise of technology and shift in beauty standards in western culture, millions of Americans, mainly women, suffer from these destructive mental illnesses that cause feelings of inadequacy and need for conformation to unrealistic standards of beauty. The destruction and trauma left by these disorders is detrimental to physical, mental, and emotional health of not only the victims of the disease, but also their families and loved ones.

To begin diving into the trauma and effects caused by these mental illnesses, it's first important to determine the types of eating disorders, their causes, and their biggest victims. The three main eating disorders include anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge eating, however there are a few others such as pica and rumination disorder that aren't as common but still have their negative effects on many individuals.(1) Even so, because the latter two disorders aren't nearly as common, I think it's more so important to delve into the top three eating disorders and see what exactly characterizes each one and understand the effects they have on people.

Widely known as the most dangerous eating disorder, having a mortality rate of 20%, anorexia nervosa, more commonly referred to as anorexia, claims the lives of thousands of people each year. (2) According to the DSM-5,

anorexia is characterized by, “ Persistent restriction of energy intake leading to significantly low body weight, either an intense fear of gaining weight or of becoming fat, or persistent behaviour that interferes with weight gain, and disturbance in the way one’s body weight or shape is experienced, undue influence of body shape and weight on self-evaluation, or persistent lack of recognition of the seriousness of the current low body weight.”(3)

This horrible disease, and many other eating disorders, don’t discriminate on who their victims are. Although more so common in young woman between the ages of 14 and 25, anorexia can manifest in men and women of all ages, races, ethnicities, and cultures. It’s destructive nature is not only dangerous to physical health, but also mental and emotional stability that allows us to function properly in society. Unfortunately, with this disorder, it is often times only identified and diagnosed in very skinny people due to social prejudice against overweight people, when in reality there are many overweight individuals struggling with this horrible illness that aren’t receiving due recognition and treatment.(4)

The next, and still very serious, eating disorder to be mentioned is bulimia nervosa, more commonly referred to as bulimia. This eating disorder is characterized by eating large amounts of food followed by vomiting, taking laxatives, fasting, or intensely exercising to rid the body of the food or excess weight gain. This addictive habit of purging food is highly dangerous as it rids the body of essential nutrients. Another sever side effect of bulimia is tooth decay, which is the result of stomach acid eating away at tooth enamel due to the incessant purging of food.(5)

Bulimia is often times not a constant disorder, as it quite frequently leads directly into eating very little or not eating at all, which would be diagnosed as anorexia. The two disorders are linked very closely with one another, and like with anorexia, no criteria has to be met to be a candidate for developing bulimia nervosa.

The last of the three most common eating disorders is called binge eating disorder. Having a much higher recovery rate, this disorder is very different from the previous two as it is characterized by, “ recurrent episodes of eating large quantities of food (often very quickly and to the point of discomfort); a feeling of a loss of control during the binge; experiencing shame, distress or guilt afterwards; and not regularly using unhealthy compensatory measures (e. g., purging) to counter the binge eating.”(6) This eating disorder is one of the newest disorders now officially listed in the DSM-5.

Binge eating centers around a loss of control over oneself and turning to food as a comfort to compensate for a lack of some type of emotional need the individual feels is lacking. Most people with this disorder feel uncomfortable eating in front of other people, hide stashes of food away that no one else can find, eat an unreasonable amount of food until they feel uncomfortably sick, and then feel intense guilt and self hatred after finishing their binge. Individuals with this disorder have tendencies to not take part in activities they would normally enjoy, spending little time with friends or at social gatherings, often times leading to depression or other mental illnesses.

All around the world, and especially in western civilization, eating disorders are becoming more common and the effects they are having on our society, and especially on our young adults/adolescents, is horrifying. Having the highest rate of mortality of any mental illness, eating disorders on average take at least one life every 62 minutes. While it is very widely understood that eating disorders most commonly target young girls and young women, 13% of woman over the age of 50 suffer from some type of eating disorder, giving us more concern for the root cause of these illnesses, as it can't merely be from societal and medial influence.(7) With that being said, I do think it's important to look at some of the major contributors to eating disorders developing in young girls/women.

A study done back in 2015 to try and determine the causes of eating disorders found that genetics seem to play somewhat of a small role and that some that people are more predisposed to develop eating disorders, but that the main cause of eating disorders around the world is from western influence.(8) Along with the 20th century has come the idealization of thinness in women, which lines up with the statistics showing that women predominantly are diagnosed with eating disorders over men.

Seeing the results of this study isn't very surprising as you see how social media, television, ads, and the modeling industry are portraying girls to look long, thin, and perfect. According to the CDC, the average woman is 5 foot 4 and weighs 168. 5 pounds. This is an extreme contrast to the average body measurements of a model which is 5 foot seven and 114 pounds.(9) Having unhealthy and unattainable standards of beauty being around us at all times is bound to have an impact on us, especially on our youth who are so heavily

influenced. While these eating disorders develop, they're taking a huge toll on mind, body, and spirit of those that become affected.

With these eating disorders, comes extremely low self esteem, incessant guilt, always being self-conscious, and a relentless need to be better. In the case of anorexia nervosa and sometimes bulimia, the individual sees a warped image of themselves when looking in the mirror. Their disorder causes them to see a different version of what everyone else around them is seeing. Depression is also a very common side effect that stems from a place of dissatisfaction, self-hatred, feelings of isolation and loneliness, and also as a direct result of the body not functioning properly due to being malnourished and deprived of essential nutrients and liquids.

While eating disorders are very treatable and most people can make a full recovery from them, they're not very easy to disassociate from, as they were such a big part of the individual's life and were deeply rooted in the person's mind. People recovering from eating disorder will often times still struggle with maintaining a healthy weight, eating an appropriate amount of food, and perceiving themselves with a positive self image for weeks, months, or even years after the treatment for their eating disorder has started. With that being said, there are several different treatment options that have proved to be very effective.

The basis for treatment is to ensure proper eating habits, sufficient exercise, and stopping any unhealthy purging or bingeing habits that may be associated with the illness. The most effective treatment options include

individual, group, and/or family psychotherapy, medical care and monitoring, nutritional counseling, and medications.(10)

The best and most effective treatment option for the individual is entirely dependent on the eating disorder they possess. For instance, those suffering from anorexia have shown to be treated most successfully through psychotherapy, especially family-based therapy where the parents are responsible for ensuring and encouraging healthy eating habits and reasonable lifestyle choices. On the other hand, those suffering from bingeing or purging have received tremendous results from undergoing cognitive behavioral therapy, which focuses on instilling positive eating habits into the individual and coaching them to being able to identify and overcome unhealthy or distorted patterns. This allows them to recognize and reject any inaccurate beliefs they may have had.(10)

While not always the first or most widely accepted option, medications such as antidepressants, antipsychotics, and mood stabilizers have proven to be another effective treatment for eating disorders, especially for those suffering from co-occurring mental illnesses, such as anxiety or depression. The top medication used to treat eating disorders is called Fluoxetine (Prozac). “ Fluoxetine is in a class of drugs called selective serotonin uptake inhibitors (SSRIs). These drugs increase serotonin levels, a brain chemical connected to mood.”(11) While medications can’t cure an eating disorder, they can help to resist urges to binge and purge and help with preoccupations surrounding food and dieting techniques. The many different treatment options available for those with eating disorders have given us the

hope and ability to treat these horrible and destructive disorders and allow physical, emotional, and mental healing for those affected.

In conclusion, while eating disorders have taken the lives of thousands and have caused destruction in the lives of many helpless people and their families, we can take comfort in the fact that these disorders are curable, and through the right help and treatment, freedom can be found, destructive behaviors can be eliminated, and happiness can be restored. We weren't created to be perfect, nor to be able to handle traumatic situations like these on our own, but through professional help and a willingness to comply with treatments, food no longer has to be something that takes control over our lives. Eating disorders probably won't be going anywhere for a long time, but with all the knowledge we have about them now, we can better understand and help those going through them.

SOURCES

1. Eating Disorder Statistics. (n. d.). Retrieved from <https://www.mirasol.net/learning-center/eating-disorder-statistics.php>
2. Sullivan, P. F. (1995). Mortality in anorexia nervosa. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 152 (7), 1073-1074.
3. Breanna. (n. d.). Classifying eating disorders – DSM-5. Retrieved from <https://www.eatingdisorders.org.au/eating-disorders/what-is-an-eating-disorder/classifying-eating-disorders/dsm-5>
4. Anorexia Nervosa. (2018, February 28). Retrieved from <https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/learn/by-eating-disorder/anorexia>

5. Bulimia nervosa. (2018, August 28). Retrieved from <https://www.womenshealth.gov/mental-health/mental-health-conditions/eating-disorders/bulimia-nervosa>
6. Binge Eating Disorder. (2018, February 22). Retrieved from <https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/learn/by-eating-disorder/bed>
7. Eating Disorder Statistics • National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders. (n. d.). Retrieved from <http://www.anad.org/education-and-awareness/about-eating-disorders/eating-disorders-statistics/>
8. Culbert, K. M., Racine, S. E., & Klump, K. L. (2015, June 19). Research Review: What we have learned about the causes of eating disorders – a synthesis of sociocultural, psychological, and biological research. Retrieved from <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/jcpp.12441>
9. Wessels, D. (n. d.). Average weight for women: Healthy and ideal ranges. Retrieved from <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/321003.php>
10. Eating Disorders. (n. d.). Retrieved from <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/eating-disorders/index.shtml>
11. TOP RATED Medication and Drug help finding help for eating disorders such as anorexia, bulimia and binge eating disorder. (n. d.). Retrieved from <https://www.edreferral.com/ed-medications>