

CAUSES OF EATING DISORDERS

While eating disorders may begin with preoccupations with food and weight, they are most often about much more than food.

Eating disorders are complex conditions that arise from a combination of long-standing behavioral, emotional, psychological, interpersonal, and social factors. Scientists and researchers are still learning about the underlying causes of these emotionally and physically damaging conditions. We do know, however, about some of the general issues that can contribute to the development of eating disorders.

People with eating disorders often use food and the control of food in an attempt to compensate for feelings and emotions that may otherwise seem over-whelming. For some, dieting, bingeing, and purging may begin as a way to cope with painful emotions and 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.

Psychological Factors:

No one factor causes an eating disorder. The list below is long and incomplete. Everyone is unique but sometimes there are patterns:

For anorexia:

- fear of growing up
- inability to separate from the family
- need to please or be liked
- perfectionism
- depression, anxiety, anger, or loneliness
- feelings of inadequacy or lack of control in life
- need for attention
- lack of self esteem
- high family expectations
- parental dieting
- family discord
- temperament - often described as the 'perfect child'
- teasing about weight and body shape

For bulimia:

- difficult regulating mood
- depression, anxiety, anger, or loneliness
- more impulsive - sometimes will be involved with shoplifting, substance abuse,
- sexual abuse
- family dysfunction
- Low self-esteem

Interpersonal Factors:

- Troubled family and personal relationships
- Difficulty expressing emotions and feelings
- History of being teased or ridiculed based on size or weight
- History of physical or sexual abuse

Social Factors:

- Cultural pressures that glorify “thinness” and place value on obtaining the “perfect body”
- Narrow definitions of beauty that include only women and men of specific body weights and shapes
- Cultural norms that value people on the basis of physical appearance and not inner qualities and strengths

Excessive Exercise:

Referred to as an exercise induced anorexia, this concept is being explored.

Thought: Did you know that rats who were put on a restrictive diet spent increasing amounts of time running on their activity wheel? They lost a great deal of weight. If the researchers let them continue to do this, the animal would have died.

Dieting:

Why do some people diet and nothing happens?

Why do others develop eating disorders?

In adolescents who develop eating disorders, those that were labeled as 'severe dieters' had an 18 times greater chance of developing an eating disorder; with moderate dieting, 5 times greater, non-dieters 1:500 chance of developing an eating disorder.

Why is dieting at certain ages more dangerous?

Whatever the reasons, dieting to lose weight may make us vulnerable to develop an eating disorder. See below for other possible explanations.

Genetics:

Genes load the gun - Environment pulls the trigger!

We are far from knowing specific genes that cause eating disorders. There are a number of genes that work with environmental triggers and possible dieting and loss of weight may influence the development of anorexia by turning on a gene that may influence an eating disorder.

There are many cases of transgenerational eating disorder and twin studies which make this connection. There is probably a 5-6 greater chance of developing an eating disorder if an immediate relative has an eating disorder.

Other Factors that can Contribute to Eating Disorders:

Scientists are still researching possible biochemical or biological causes of eating disorders. In some individuals with eating disorders, certain chemicals in the brain that control hunger, appetite, and digestion have been found to be imbalanced. The exact meaning and implications of these imbalances remains under investigation.

Eating disorders are complex conditions that can arise from a variety of potential causes. Once started, however, they can create a **self-perpetuating cycle** of physical and emotional destruction. All eating disorders require professional help.

Sources:

www.nationaleatingdisorders.org

www.anad.org