

Coping with College Series

Understanding Eating Disorders

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Most people overeat once in a while, and many people diet. People with eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia have disruptions in their normal eating patterns that go well beyond overeating or dieting. People with eating disorders may excessively restrict food intake, or may binge eat and then use laxatives or vomiting to purge as a way to achieve desired weight loss. Eating disorders may cause serious physical problems, some of them life-threatening.

Restricting, bingeing, and purging become part of a vicious cycle, and people with eating disorders often come to feel trapped by obsessions about eating, weight, body image, and food. At the same time, they may feel quite self-conscious about their eating habits, and may attempt to hide this from others. Even though they may feel trapped by the eating disorder, they find it hard to admit to others that they are out of control. People with eating disorders often tend to be perfectionists and may be extremely critical about the way they look. They may feel fat even when quite thin.

Well-meaning family and friends often try to get people with eating disorders to eat more food, or to stop bingeing and purging, treating this as a matter of choice or will power. They do not understand the vicious cycle in which the person with the eating disorder is trapped. Nagging often makes the problem worse. Rarely can a person with an eating disorder stop permanently just because they choose to. This is because eating disorders are more than just a way of achieving a desired body weight goal. Eating disorders are complex illnesses that, left untreated, may be life threatening.

There are different theories about the cause of eating disorders, these include psychological, biological, and cultural factors. Anxiety and depression are common in people with eating disorders. Bingeing and purging may act as a way to relieve anxiety. Often eating disorders are a way to gain control over life circumstances. The value our culture places on extreme thinness also seems to play a role.

Some signs of eating disorders include: Obsessively thinking about food, eating, body size, and weight; excessive exercise; becoming very anxious about eating; feeling bloated or fat after eating very little; bingeing on food until sick; purging through vomiting or laxatives; feeling guilty after eating; and weighing yourself several times a day. A part of the eating disorder may also involve denial that there is a problem.

There are various treatments for eating disorders, often depending on the severity of the problem. The first step is to acknowledge that there is a problem and to find help. Unfortunately, the emphasis on extreme thinness as fashionable tends to make this problem more difficult to acknowledge.

If you think you might have an eating disorder, or are concerned about a friend who might have an eating disorder, you can consult with a staff member of the Student Counseling Services to better understand what you might do. SCS offers both individual and group counseling for those with eating disorders. These services are free of charge to Illinois State students.