

Teenagers and Eating Disorders

*I look in the mirror and who do I see?
A fat, ugly person just staring at me.
She looks so unhappy, worried and scared,
Of the meals she must face -she isn't prepared.*

*She must not have breakfast, she must have control,
To be able to starve and lose fat by the roll.
She binges at lunch-time, she just had to eat.
But that's the last time, 'cos bulimia she'll beat.*

*She caves in at tea-time, she just couldn't last.
Food saps her esteem, puts all hope in the past.
She asks God to help her, but he just isn't there.
It feels like He's left her, like he just doesn't care.*

*She needs a big hug, her confidence gone.
She sobs and cries, where did it go wrong?
She cries in her sleep, when she falls into bed,
As fear of tomorrow, fills her with dread.*

*She feels lonely and sad, she hates life you see.
I look in the mirror and realise it's me.*

written by a Luton teenager, 1995

"Food. A fundamental part of everyday living. It should be as natural as breathing, but it isn't. But then oxygen doesn't contain any calories... As soon as I wake up I'm in an immediate dilemma about what I should have for breakfast. Toast or cereal? 2 slices or 1? Special K or Coco Pops? Skimmed or semi? The list is endless. Then of course I've got to calculate how many calories is contained in it. Are there more or less than yesterday? Is there an healthier alternative? The consistent worrying continues. When I eat a big meal, half of my mind is telling me I'm going to put on weight, while the other more rational side is telling me not to be so stupid. It's hard deciding which side I should listen to. I need someone to shout at me on behalf of the rational side.....the weaker, quieter side that's so easy to ignore.

I don't know what "thin" is. If I was to lose a stone I would want to shed another, then another, and maybe a few pounds. I don't know how to look in the mirror and think slim. Somehow I always see the bits that wobble first. Eating seems like such a novelty. Now I'm so much better it's like a whole new experience, not necessarily nice, but new, with room for improvement. I watch how others eat with enormous fascination. I find it hard to understand how they can eat "sub-consciously" without really taking notice of what's going in. I still assess every mouthful - it gives me sanity to get through the next meal.

I don't like the way I am. Sometimes I cry with frustration at the way I worry and let food "invade" my thoughts. I long for the day when I can go to Pizza Hut or McDonalds, or eat

a Snickers without a care in the world, it's not much fun when I'm overly conscience of what I'm eating. Most of all I want to be happy and walking with God, not worried and walking away from Him."

FACT: 50% of 14 -16 year old girls would like to lose weight but only 9% are actually overweight

Teenagers and eating disorders have been a growing issue for the past ten years. For every young person with a serious eating disorder, there are many others who still struggle at some level with food. Why has it got to be such a problem?

Our world has a lot to answer for. Magazines, television, adverts and films are constantly pushing perfect images on to us. Young people grow up with a distorted idea of what 'normal' might be. They're given an impossible ideal which doesn't take into account the different shapes and sizes of ordinary people.

FACT: 18% of 14 -16 year old girls don't eat breakfast

Believe it or not, the shape of mannequins in most shop displays are not even obtainable for the thinnest teenager. They're an imaginary body shape that, if in real humans, would mean it would be impossible to give birth.

But those same mannequins wear the clothes that create the image teenagers are told they must have. No wonder young people feel like they're never thin enough.

Peer pressure also contributes. A single teasing remark about being overweight can be devastating in its results. And there are plenty of other reasons for the problem: better labelling on food products has been good news for shoppers but it also means teenagers have become acutely aware of the fat and carbohydrate content of their every mouthful.

FACT: 1 in 100 secondary school girls suffer from anorexia nervosa

For some teenagers, the result may just be a careful interest in what is eaten. They may be keen to accompany you on the weekly shopping trip or have very particular requests about what they're prepared to eat. For others, their concern with their own weight leads on to a more dangerous problem.

Let me tell you about Suzannah. She's been making herself sick for so long now that she doesn't even have to stick her fingers down her throat, she just contracts her stomach. Her eating pattern consists of starving, bingeing and vomiting and she no longer has any concept of what a normal eating is.

Suzannah is tall (5ft 9in) and slim. She is intelligent and attractive. Yet for the past 4 years, this gifted teenager with good GCSE grades and A levels on the way, has been the victim of a disorder known as bulimia.

FACT: 2 in 100 women aged from 15 to 45 suffer from bulimia

Contrary to popular belief, eating disorders are not about a disinterest in food: it's quite the opposite. Sufferers are obsessed with food. They think about it a great deal and often record their every mouthful in a diary.

The two most common eating disorders are anorexia nervosa and bulimia. While anorexics may eat very little week after week, bulimic behaviour involves starving yourself for as long as possible but then bingeing on enormous quantities of high calorie foods. Usually they will then try to clean it all out by making themselves vomit, starving themselves again or using laxative or diuretic medicines. Unlike anorexic behaviour, bulimics usually manage to keep their weight within a normal range. This is because when they binge, they often go for large amounts of particularly fattening foods such as chocolate, cakes, biscuits, butter and cheese, and their body manages to absorb some of what it needs.

FACT: 90% of sufferers are girls

At the root of almost all eating disorders is very low self worth. Plagued by the pressures of the media and impossible ideals, young people with these problems often feel a terrible sense of uselessness, failure and self-hate. Ironically, many people who are bulimic often seem very confident, happy and successful on the outside. Unlike anorexic behaviour which other people can see by the amount of weight you lose, bulimic behaviour can usually be kept secret. While someone may appear to eat in front of others quite normally, they often go straight into the loo afterwards to get rid of the food. They can't control their desire to eat they can control whether the food stays in their body. Suzannah says:

"It's like it controls every part of you for a while and creates an obsession out of the smallest situation. I hate it, I hate being scared of food, I hate throwing up, I hate taking tablets to try and make me relax, I hate the way it affects my everyday life. I hate the way it affects my relationships, I hate the way I look, the things I say, the things I do, the way I act. All in all, I hate Bulimia and me."

WHAT YOU AS A PARENT CAN DO

Given the pressures on them, most teenage girls worry a little about what they eat. However, there are certain signs to look for if you suspect more of a problem:

- Extreme weight loss or gain, trying to cover up their shape, weighing themselves often and constantly talking about their size.
- Repeatedly skipping meals and wanting to go on diets.
- Fascination with healthy eating books, programmes and skinny models.
- Money or food disappearing from the house.
- Always going to the bathroom after a meal.
- Becoming withdrawn and staying in.
- Loss of interest in things, low self esteem.

Of course, a teenager may be displaying some of these and not have a problem at all but if you are concerned further information is available from:

The Eating Disorders Association www.edauk.com

Anorexia and Bulimia Care www.anorexiabulimiare.co.uk/