

# HealthQuest

A workplace wellness update... from your EAP



## Eating Disorders, Body Image and Self-Esteem

The average person sees 400 to 600 ads per day, and by the age of 17 has seen over 250,000 commercial media images. Scenes, characters and products that have created an alternate world: A reality where the average woman is a size two (instead of the North American average of 10 or 12), where 45 is the new 25 and 12 the new 16. Is it any wonder that eating disorders are on the rise?

Eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of all mental illnesses. Many people don't seek help for themselves, or know how to recognize signs of eating disorders in loved ones. By educating yourself, your children and loved ones, you can learn to dispel the 'perfect' body image and replace it with a healthy one.

### Common Eating Disorders

The following eating disorders are broken into distinct categories for clarity, however it's not uncommon for people to have symptoms from two or three of these categories. Also, like other disorders, they fall on a continuum from slightly unhealthy to deadly behaviours.

#### Anorexia Nervosa

People suffering from anorexia nervosa literally starve themselves to lose weight, despite the fact that most are significantly underweight. Anorexia sufferers deny themselves of food and are terrified of gaining weight. This fear is both powerful and uncontrollable. Anorexia leads to serious health problems including bone loss, shrinking of vital organs and heart problems, which can lead to death. Signs and symptoms include:

- dieting to extremes, sometimes coupled with purging
- loss of menstrual periods
- fixation on control
- preoccupation with body weight
- restricting food or types of food, secrecy around food
- depression, irritability and low self-esteem
- withdrawn and compulsive behaviour related to food
- wearing layers of clothing or baggy clothing
- withdrawing from social network
- increase in use of stimulants throughout the day: coffee, cigarettes, or drugs.

#### Bulimia Nervosa

A person with bulimia binges, eats large amounts of food in a short period of time, then purges. Forms of purging include: vomiting, over-exercising, excessive use of laxatives or diuretics. People with bulimia feel a loss of control during a binge, followed by shame or guilt afterwards. Some warning signs of bulimia are:

- eating large amounts of food in a short period of time
- feeling ashamed about overeating and fear of weight gain
- secrecy around food or 'missing food'
- repeated episodes of bingeing and purging
- depression, loneliness, low self-esteem and shame
- frequent visits to the washroom after meals
- tooth yellowing/decay, scratches on hands
- excessive exercising.

#### Binge Eating Disorder

People with binge eating disorder eat large amounts of food over a short time period and can't stop eating. Unlike bulimia, no purging is involved. However, the same feelings of guilt, embarrassment and distress plague binge eaters. While women make up an estimated 90% of anorexia and bulimia sufferers, almost 50% of binge eaters are men. Signs to watch out for are:

- steady weight gain
- eating more quickly than normal
- eating when there is no hunger
- loss of control around food
- depression and guilt
- unexplained spending increase.

#### What causes these disorders?

No one factor causes an eating disorder: typically layers of psychological, social and biological issues play a part in its emergence. Common factors that can increase the chances of developing an eating disorder include:

**Biological.** Studies suggest there may be a genetic link to anorexia, bulimia and binge eating. Recent research connects anorexia and bulimia to disturbances in the brain's level of dopamine and serotonin: chemicals related to mood, control of impulses and appetite. Other research found differences in the melanocortin 4 receptor gene-related to behaviour, eating and obesity of binge eaters.

**Psychological.** Often a person with an eating disorder has trouble communicating and dealing with negative

emotions such as anger, sadness and fear. Experts also point to low self-esteem, and perfectionism-traits that ensures the person is never satisfied with him or herself. Depending on the eating disorder, the person may also display: an overwhelming need to please others, a need for attention or a fear of self-sufficiency. Eating disorders are often correlated with obsessive-compulsive disorder, anxiety and depression.

**Family.** Guardians or relatives critical of a young person's weight or body shape can lead to low self-esteem and body image problems. Abuse survivors may also try to gain power over their environment by either controlling what they eat, bingeing for comfort, and weight gain.

**Social.** There are countless scenarios where the social pressure is on to achieve the physical ideal of the group. Young people in particular - who are still working to carve out an identity - often value what others think over their own ideas and opinions. This is especially true of youths with poor self-esteem, who lack the confidence to reject the status quo.

## Gaining a Healthier Body Image

**Praise yourself, family, and friends.** Don't worry about what isn't perfect or things about your body you can't change. Instead, focus on the parts of your body you love. Also, focus on personal strengths and skills unrelated to body image.

**Stay realistic.** You know the images on television and in magazines are airbrushed, use makeup artists and professional lighting - don't waste your time aspiring to these fake images. Beauty is truly skin deep so focus on 'lifting' your inner beauty.

**Keep active** - not to lose weight but to have great overall health. Moderate exercise comes in many shapes and sizes. Just ensure your heart is pumping, you're having fun and are not overdoing it. It's also a great pick-me-up which can boost your energy levels and mood.

**Set a good example.** Children mimic what they see. Scrap yo-yo dieting and work towards building a healthy family lifestyle that includes a well-balanced diet and plenty of active together time. Instead of watching a DVD, why not go tobogganing, for a walk or a bike ride?

**Talk about it.** Discuss the influence of society and the media with your kids and teens so they become informed and savvy participants, who can separate fantasy from fiction, rather than passive observers.

**Get resources.** Investigate books and websites on healthy eating, and leading a balanced lifestyle.

## Helping a Loved One

Discovering someone you love has an eating disorder can be harrowing. But while you don't have the power to single-handedly solve the issue, your response can positively impact recovery. Be sure to:

**Take the problem seriously.** Act quickly: health and psychological complications from an eating disorder are dangerous and extreme. If the loved one is your child or teen, seek professional support for your family immediately. If he or she is an adult, research professionals, hotlines and support groups in your area, pass the list on and encourage your loved one to seek help ASAP.

**Offer encouragement and honesty.** Avoiding discussion about the eating disorder isn't going to make it go away. Be open and honest about your feelings and concerns, reserve judgment and do a lot of listening. Your loved one needs support and encouragement every step of the way.

**Get the facts.** Learn as much as you can about the disorder: it not only shows you take the issue seriously, but can also help you understand the problem, treatment and relationship with your loved one better.

The road to recovery can be a challenging journey. If you or a loved one is suffering from an eating disorder, know that it's not something anyone should have to face alone: skilled professional support is available.

For those who incessantly worry about that last ten pounds, it's time to transform self-doubt and criticism into self-acceptance. Maintain a realistic body image, stay aware of negative outside influences and try leading a healthy lifestyle free of diets and 'forbidden foods.' Not only is it a more enjoyable way to live, it's also the best way to ensure you and impressionable loved ones stay focused on a healthy body and mind.

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If you have any questions about this topic, or if you wish to discuss a personal situation you may be experiencing, we invite you to contact your Employee Assistance Program (EAP). All contact between you and your EAP is completely confidential.

**English Service: 1.800.387.4765**

**French Service: 1.800.361.5676**

*HealthQuest is produced four times a year for employees and their families. Any comments? E-mail us at [info@warrenshepell.com](mailto:info@warrenshepell.com)*

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