

## IN MY OPINION

Get real about eating disorders

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Special to The Beacon

February 28, 2005

As many as 10 million females and 1 million males are fighting a life and death battle with an eating disorder such as anorexia or bulimia, in the United States alone. An estimated 25 million more struggle with binge eating disorder or compulsive overeating.

Because of the shame and secretiveness associated with eating disorders, however, many cases go unreported. And despite the information, preventive efforts and treatment specialists, eating disorders remain at epidemic proportions and more people than ever suffer from them. Anorexia is the number one cause of death above all other mental illnesses. The medical complications of anorexia are very serious, as the major internal organs of the body shut down and lead to cardiac arrest and sudden death.

Professional treatment is extremely important, but, the assessment of an eating disorder is tricky in a diet obsessed world. For instance, 91 percent of women surveyed on a college campus had attempted to control their weight through dieting and 22 percent dieted “often” or “always”. Surveys show that dieting is important to younger people, too, with 51 percent of 9- and 10- year-old girls saying they feel better about themselves if they are on a diet.

Because dieting obviously includes restriction of food or food groups, a parent, teacher or friend may not recognize the signs and symptoms of an eating disorder until it is too late. The main criterion of anorexia is the restriction of food as a means to refuse maintaining a healthy, normal weight. Other signs of an eating disorder include a distorted body image, feeling fat, secretive eating and compulsive exercise. These symptoms are considered mainstream behaviors for dieters. It is no surprise that many people who develop eating disorders actually pinpoint their descent to when they decided to diet to lose a few pounds.

The focus on dieting and appearance, in my opinion, will never disappear in our media and culture. The desire to change and alter one’s appearance to the detriment of physical and psychological health is deeper than wanting to look like a model. Being able to look at a fashion magazine and not beat oneself up for not looking like the people portrayed in it depends on one’s sense of self and inner qualities. If not, everyone would develop an eating disorder. So, when confronted with the possibility of someone close to you having an eating disorder, it is important to seek professional help.

Signs of disordered eating include inappropriate perception of hunger and satiety, feeling a lack of control in life and a belief that self-worth is dependent upon low weight. Other specific behavior changes include perfectionist and compulsive behaviors, isolation from family and friends, anxiety, bingeing, fatigue, fear of food and gaining weight, sleep

disturbances and mood swings. Certainly, some of these signs can account for other issues, but as a cluster of symptoms these, plus a dramatic weight loss, fluctuations in weight or weight gain, can indicate the development of an eating disorder.

National Eating Disorders Awareness Week is February 27 thru March 5, 2005. The Get Real campaign is part of the National Eating Disorders Association's effort to provide the public with a serious and powerful look at the dangerous consequences of eating disorders. The campaign aims to increase public understanding that eating disorders are real illnesses happening to real people and they demand serious attention.