

An eating disorder is a serious mental health issue that has the potential to wreak havoc on the person who is suffering as well as his or her family and friends. Eating disorders are characterized by unhealthy eating behaviors. They can potentially affect people of any race, sex, income level, and countries of origin.

People with eating disorders often experience many mental, physical and psychological problems. Physically, eating disorders create heightened risk of medical conditions such as heart attack, diabetes, osteoporosis, and high or low BMI (body mass index). People with eating disorders will often feel ashamed and guilty about their physical appearance and eating habits which can lead to isolation. They also have a higher risk for having anxiety and depression. It is estimated that over 3.3 million lives are lost every year due to eating disorders making it one of the highest mortality rates of any mental illness.

The four most prevalent eating disorders are Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia Nervosa, Binge Eating Disorder, and Other Specified Feeding and Eating Disorder.

Anorexia Nervosa (AN) is characterized by extreme restriction of food intake that results in significantly low BMI. People with AN often fear gaining weight and feel overweight even when they're considered underweight. They may feel that wearing certain sized clothing will contribute to their self-worth. Extreme dieting is the most common symptom of AN but it can also be accompanied by excessive exercise, taking laxatives, diet pills and teas, and/or making themselves vomit on a regular basis. A particular challenge with a person suffering from AN is their inability to recognize the negative effects this disease has on their body.

Bulimia Nervosa (BN) is characterized by binge eating for at least once a week for 3 months, using compensatory behaviors once a week for 3 months, and body image concerns. Binge eating occurs when a person eats a very large amount of food and then using extreme exercise, vomiting, fasting, and taking laxatives to compensate. BN can result in very serious medical consequences such as tooth decay and ruptured stomach.

Binge Eating Disorder (BED) is characterized by having at least 3 of the following: eating very rapidly, eating large amounts of food when not hungry, eating alone because of embarrassment of how much food they are consuming, or feeling disgusted and depressed after binge eating. People with BED often experience both physical and mental health conditions and may experience teasing and bullying due to their weight.

Other Specified Feeding and Eating Disorder (OSFED) is a more diverse eating disorder category for those who don't specifically meet the criteria for one of the other three disorders. This does not mean it isn't a serious condition as it still leads to medical conditions and mental health problems often equal to or worse than AN, BN or BED.

Experts cannot say exactly what causes an eating disorder or predict who will develop an eating disorder. Most would agree that they are very complicated illnesses that stem from a very complex combination of biological, environmental and psychological factors. With early detection and treatment, those with eating disorders can make a full recovery.

It is important to remember that the person who is suffering may not believe they have a problem. Psychotherapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy and some medications have been shown to successfully treat eating disorders but each individual case will vary. Severe cases may require hospitalization.

Patience is important due to the fact that treatment for eating disorders can be a very long and drawn-out process. Eating disorders tend to get worse over time and if left untreated, they can cause serious long-term health issues; therefore, it's never too early to reach out for help from a medical professional or helpline.

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