



## **DEADLY EATING**

It sits there in the box, that mouthwatering pizza-unable to move or defend itself against the jaws of the human preparing to devour it. But for many college students, that piece of pizza looks like the most ominous, threatening monster on earth. These people have what is called an eating disorder; it is the food that controls them and their behavior.

People like this feel defenseless against their worst enemy, food. The college atmosphere can even intensify these pressures. After all, most social events take place around eating and drinking, whether in college dining halls, at parties, or just late night snacks with friends. Also, college can be a very stressful time that may bring up insecurities and anxieties.

There are several different kinds of eating disorders. For people with anorexia nervosa, the mere sight of pizza could alarm them into believing they are gaining pounds by just looking at it. People who are compulsive overeaters are likely to consume that pizza in what seems like one big gulp even though they may already be grossly overweight. Or, if they have what is known as bulimia, they will probably scarf down the pizza and then vomit it right back up. In addition, symptoms of each of these disorders may coexist in the same person, or the person may vacillate from one disorder to another.

All of these people are using food as a substitute to cope with feelings and pressures that they face every day. To add to this, our society even promotes thinness. "Thin is in, thin is what you have to be." It has been estimated that as many as 60 million Americans, mostly females, may be afflicted with one of these eating disorders. In fact, a national "Eating Disorders Week" has been instituted to increase awareness of this problem.

Anorexia is a disease that is characterized by an intense preoccupation with food, combined with an irrational fear of becoming fat. There is a disturbance of body image, in which the person feels fat, even when emaciated.

People who are anorexic are often characterized as high achievers and perfectionists. They may be introverted and conscious of other people's attitudes. Most have a large degree of denial and are usually very dependent on their families. Anorexics may also feel that they only control they have in their lives is their eating habits.

Starvation in anorexia is much more than a severe case of dieting. Although it may start out as a diet, it can be deadly as anorexics may lose more than 25% of their normal body weight. Besides this drastic weight loss, there are several other possible symptoms:

- An intense desire to be thin
- Cessation of menstruation
- Distortion of body image (e.g., person may think they are fat even though they may be emaciated)
- Hyperactive exercising practice
- Depression, mood disturbances, and a low self-esteem
- Frequent weighings

Another eating disorder is bulimia, the "binge-purge syndrome," which exhibits a behavior pattern of extreme bingeing followed by self-induced vomiting and/or abuse of laxatives and diuretics. Other bulimic behaviors include fasting and compulsive exercise. The goal of these behaviors is to alter or maintain the "ideal" weight. About 90% of bulimics are women and about 1 in 5 of today's college women have reportedly engaged in bulimic behaviors.

A bulimic may be hard to identify because she is usually of average weight and she is secretive about her disorder. She is usually a person with low self-esteem and believes that it is difficult to get people to like her.

Therefore, she strives to be perfect-she hides negative emotions, is a high achiever, and is fearful about being overweight in appearance. Her accomplishments are never "good enough." She often views her bulimic behavior as a way of being in control of her life and of making her appearance, and herself, more likeable.

Bulimic behavior has serious physical and psychological effects. First, it is addictive and progressive; therefore, the feelings of comfort and control following purging become shorter, and the purging often becomes more frequent.

Secondly, purging may result in:

- Malnutrition
- Gum disease
- Intestinal problems
- Rupture of the esophagus
- Hernias
- Onset of diabetes
- Electrolyte imbalances leading to menstrual irregularities and cardiac problems, to name a few.

Also, the bulimic feels the need to hide her behaviors and therefore often withdraws from situations in which her disorder may be exposed. This causes stress, depression and loneliness.

Thus bulimia is not a fitness fad; it is a serious disorder and needs to be treated as such.

If you are a person with an eating disorder it is important to realize that you are not alone. It is also important for you to accept that it is an addictive process that may be too difficult to stop by yourself. There are many treatment options available to you on campus and in the community including group or family therapy, or hospitalization in a specialized treatment program. Support groups are available, as well.

With treatment and support of friends and family, that threatening slice of pizza becomes an object you have control over rather than something that has control over you.

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