



For God has not given us a spirit of fear; but of power and of love, and of a sound mind. ~ 2 Timothy

Dear Parents,

Though the pandemic is thankfully well behind us, as a nation, we are continuing to reap the consequences of that distressing period — namely, the mental health crisis among our youth. Likely you've heard the statistics related to anxiety, depression, and suicide. What you may not be aware of is just how rapidly eating disorders have skyrocketed, in both females and males.

For young people, the pandemic was the perfect storm to introduce, perpetuate, and exacerbate disordered eating. The social isolation, hours spent online, the explosion in social media content, and the abnormal self-scrutiny as young people had to view themselves up close on Zoom or other platforms to "attend" school, have led to a devastating increase in kids and teens being treated for eating disorders.

Eating disorders are serious mental illnesses. Powerful thoughts and feelings about control, food, bodies, and self-image can lead to very problematic behaviors around food intake and exercise. There are multiple expressions of disordered eating, most of which have a secretive component, making them difficult to recognize early on. Further, many of the symptoms that often accompany an eating disorder - anxiety, depression, mood swings - garner parents' attention, and may initially obscure the eating issue.

Eating disorders are no longer mainly associated with females. The number of boys and men with body dysmorphia and disordered eating is rising at a faster rate than that of females. Estimates vary, but most experts agree that 25-33% (1 in 3) of those struggling with an eating disorder are male.

With boys, the language around this issue may differ from girls — guys may focus on being "cut", "ripped", "jacked", "lean", or "yoked"; they may worry about being too small, rather than too big. They may focus on eating "clean" or cutting carbs, taking supplements, and obsessively working out. They may substitute energy drinks for meals or use nicotine pouches like Zyn to suppress their appetite.

Girls are more likely to focus on wanting to be thin or perfect (restricting), or they may use eating or overeating (binging) for comfort and as a coping mechanism for difficult emotions. Girls are also prone to following fad diets, counting calories, substituting meals with coffee drinks, eliminating whole food groups, and making excuses to avoid mealtimes or situations with food.

You may be weary of hearing about the negative impacts of social media on teens, but the concerns are increasingly backed by research, making it crucial we understand its role in adding to the eating disorder crisis we're experiencing.

Scrolling inevitably brings posts related to bodies and food. But searching for or liking health or fitness-related posts can send a tween or teen down a dangerous path of content. “Thinspo” or *thinspiration* refers to any kind of media that encourages an unhealthy body image and disordered eating, and there is plenty of it on apps like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. There are even “pro-ana” accounts that promote and celebrate anorexia. There are fad diets that boggle the mind (cotton ball diet), and lots of “what I eat in a day” posts, which often focus on low caloric intake. It’s impossible for this content not to play into a developing teen’s mind and emotions.

Worrying about appearance is nothing new for teens. It’s a (mostly) normal part of development as teens become more self-aware and observant of others. They worry about their skin, hair, body shape, athletic ability, and clothing, and wonder how they measure up; many girls will admit feeling envious of others’ appearance at some point. Again, most of this is a phase and normal. It becomes problematic when they suffer dysmorphia, become depressed, experience self-loathing, or go to harmful extremes to change something about themselves.

This is a hard topic, I know. I want to inform and bring awareness, not scare or bombard you. There are a few links below that expand on this topic and provide resources. More than anything, I want to encourage you to keep your eyes and ears open in your home for any concerning behaviors or physical changes related to eating and weight. And to be aware, if possible, what apps your tweens and teens are on and what’s in their feeds.

Lastly, how we, the adults, talk about food and bodies is so important. Many loving parents and grandparents inadvertently make comments about weight, appearance, dieting, and exercise, not realizing the power of our words.

I welcome a dialogue about this topic and am open to your questions as well as your own knowledge and experience. As always, if you have questions or concerns, please reach out to me, Nurse Bri, or your medical provider.

Best,
Erin Torr, MFT

Resources:

[What are Eating Disorders?](#)

<https://drlisadamour.com/resource/how-do-i-tell-if-my-child-has-an-eating-disorder/>

<https://eatingdisorders.ucsd.edu/resources/>

<https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/eating-disorders-anorexia-bulimia-are-severe-ever-rcna80745>

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/eating-disorders>

[Eating disorders are affecting more adolescent boys. Here’s why and what signs to look for | PBS News Weekend](#)