

## **Eating Disorders in Teenagers: A call for action to improve awareness**

I am a 16-year-old girl who has seen teens around me battle with anorexia nervosa since middle school. In my seventh grade year, a friend of mine would barely eat at school and at home by self-starving herself. She would pride herself on those obsessive habits of small portion sizes and lack of food. I knew she wanted to be 'skinny', but no matter what she did and no matter how much weight she lost, she would never be satisfied with herself. I began to think this style of eating was normal.

I had my own weight loss journey in the following year, but it was similar to hers. At the time, I coupled a few meals a day with excessive exercise, which eventually led to a fainting incident immediately after a dance ballet performance. Neither she nor I understood the severity of the issue. For someone like me, who loved to dance, hike, and be active, this was very concerning and a wake-up call. I realized how a lack of adequate nutrition and focus on self-image was affecting my health, emotional, mental, and physical. My mother helped me by recognizing that I was always tired and often skipped meals, and she pointed out that I wasn't eating enough. I had been pushing the signs aside for months but after speaking with my mother, I finally understood how serious the consequences of my eating habits actually were.

I witnessed many others struggling with body image made me realize just how damaging eating disorders can really be. After my recovery, I began to see my experience reflected in others which led me to advocate for not only myself, but every other teen who felt invisible. I found a purpose that could turn my pain into advocacy and awareness.

Eating disorders in teenagers: In recent years, eating disorder rates have increased, specifically among adolescents, because of the prevalence of unrealistic ideals and the numerous everyday stressors.<sup>1</sup>

Eating disorders are mental health conditions based on severe, ongoing disruptions in eating behaviors, often accompanied by distressing thoughts and emotions. Types include

anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, binge eating disorder, and avoidant restrictive food intake disorder.<sup>2</sup>

Common preoccupations involve food, weight, or shape, and anxieties about eating or the consequences of eating. Behaviors associated with eating disorders are restrictive eating, avoiding foods, binge eating, or purging through vomiting, exercise, or laxatives.<sup>3</sup> Among teens, eating disorders go undiagnosed because they are not aware of the complications that can occur due to a lack of proper nutrition and diet.

There has been and still is a stigma around mental health, which prevents the public from gaining a more thorough knowledge of what eating disorders are, especially in teenagers.<sup>4</sup>

When most of my friends talk about mental health struggles, the focus is primarily on anxiety and depression, but not eating disorders. While anxiety, depression, and other mental health disorders are also very important and need to be addressed in a timely manner, my personal experience has taught me about the lack of awareness among teens of the consequences of eating disorders. I thought it was normal to be skipping meals or to be obsessing over calorie count because I didn't know the price I would have to pay on my health. My experience has showed that most people have little understanding of how serious eating disorders are. I've noticed teenagers joking about not eating or celebrating one another for weight loss, with no idea as to the long-term consequences (physical and mental).

Various media platforms, from social networks to film and television, play a vital role in promoting flawed beauty standards. Teens are constantly on their phones and exposed to 'perfect' bodies.<sup>5</sup> Social media can distort perceptions about beauty by convincing people that they need to look a certain way to be accepted. Even other teens, especially those on platforms like Instagram or TikTok, play into this idea of a concrete beauty standard with peer pressure. Peer pressure, directly or indirectly, is powerful enough for teens to change their appearance using any method.

Across cultures and in many families, status is reflected in body image, which isn't true.<sup>6</sup> Adolescents easily believe what they are told, so they follow these norms blindly without a second thought. People may say that they believe inner beauty is most important, but most care about outer beauty, even if it's unhealthy for them.

9% of people in the United States will have an eating disorder in their lifetime.<sup>7</sup> With teens who have eating disorders, they won't talk about it because they don't want to be seen as broken or fragile. Eating disorders don't define who we are as people, and it is important for us to discuss openly our struggles and challenges, and support each other.

It is important for the parents, friends, and family to create a supportive environment where the teenagers can share their concerns and struggles without being judged and also receive the help they need in a timely manner. Noticing the signs of eating disorders needs to be more normalized in society so we can prevent future consequences in our youth. Eating disorders can be life-threatening to a person's emotional, physical, and social health. If left unchecked, they can lead to a greater risk of suicide and nonsuicidal self-injury.<sup>8</sup>

Parents should monitor their teens' eating habits and create a safe space for their teens to talk openly about their struggles with eating. Food helps to keep us alive, so we need to help those who are fighting their own battles for a basic necessity.

The reason I am sharing my own experience is so that other teens can feel seen and realize that they are not alone. There is a lot of silence when it comes to discussing eating disorders in teens. I want to speak out, educate others, and challenge any harmful norms I come across. This topic has encouraged me to keep on researching the aspects that intersect social media, culture, and mental health.

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## References

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