

Eating Disorders

Anorexia nervosa and bulimia are serious problems. 20 per cent of college women face food disorder problems. Why?

By Catherine Doucette



Jane, 22, is a student at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax. She is studying hard so she can find a job after she graduates this April. Jane (a pseudonym) was a chubby teenager. Her family supported her attempts to diet and lose weight. But she was never really satisfied with her body.

Once, her doctor prescribed diet pills and she lost 10 pounds. But she became addicted to the pills. When she stopped taking them, she quickly gained 25 pounds.

In her first year of university, she gained more weight and became even more unhappy with her body. Then, Jane started her routine.

Whenever she thought she should lose a few pounds, she would fast for as long as she could. But once she started to eat again, she could not control her hunger. She would order a large pizza and eat it alone; then she would sneak down to the vending machine for a couple of chocolate bars.

After she finished bingeing, guilt set in. She would feel so guilty she would go to the bathroom and make herself vomit.

"I had to get it out of my system," says Jane. "I'd always figure that no food is good."

Eating disorders affect almost one in five college women. In Canada, there are approximately 50,000 young women between the ages of 14 and 24 suffering from Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia, or a combination of both.

Anorexics usually have an intense fear of becoming fat. They think they look fat even though they are generally extremely underweight. Bulimics go through a cycle of bingeing and

purging. They will eat whatever high calorie food is near and then purge themselves by vomiting, fasting, or abusing laxatives. Both problems include an intense preoccupation with food.

A survey done by a student at Mount Saint Vincent showed that 77 per cent of the female residents are unhappy with their bodies and would like to lose weight. Almost 40 per cent of the women believe that men prefer women who are slimmer than themselves.

Women are usually the victims of this disorder because of social pressures to be thin. It also affects men, but the problem is usually not as common nor as severe.

Generally, being overweight interferes with women's lives more than men, explains Ann Wetmore, psychologist and acting director of Student Services and Counselling at Mount Saint Vincent. Also, women are more likely to be compulsive eaters. They eat because they are depressed and then feel guilty for eating and purge themselves.

As a result, they feel guilty because they know they have a problem and the cycle repeats itself.

Elaine (a pseudonym) is a first-year student at the Mount and knows how the cycle goes.

"The two things that I always

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loved to do were eat and play sports. In junior high, everyone always told me how skinny I was. But then I hit high school and even though I still played sports, these hips just came out of

nowhere," says Elaine.

In grade ten, she gained 10 pounds and that was the last time she was happy with her weight. "I hate dieting or exercising for the sake of exercising. By accident, I found a way to lose weight. When I started drinking beer, sometimes it made me sick. Whenever I ate too much at a party, I'd just grab a couple of beer."

But that stopped working so Elaine found another way. "I used to stick my finger down my throat. Then it got too hard to make myself sick so I just gave up. I still hate my size, but I'm learning to live with it."

Elaine and others who suffer from this eating disorder do not realize purging is dangerous and sometimes ineffective.

Fasting or strict dieting causes a rebound effect. The body thinks there is a famine so when one starts to eat again, it stores more of the food to defend against the next famine.

Abusing laxatives leads to the erosion of bowel tissue which can eventually cause some serious problems. Vomiting brings stomach acids into the mouth which erodes tooth enamel.

Jane realized she needed help with her eating problem when she could no longer control her cycle of bingeing and purging. She had virtually stopped eating for

three weeks.

"I was really concerned because it was getting out of hand and I knew it was different. Besides it would only get worse in the work force. I have a phobia about being

fat. Anything beyond a certain weight and I become totally unreasonable."

Individuals with eating disorders are usually bright, pretty, high achievers, and terrified of being fat.

I've already had students in my office weighing 67 pounds and saying, 'look how fat my thighs are.'" Wetmore says. She is concerned about the number of women who are suffering from

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eating problems but not getting any help.

Jane is getting help, but it took a lot of courage to make an appointment with the university's staff doctor and admit she had a problem.

"For a while, I was sorry that I had told anyone. I wished that people would leave me alone and pretend it wasn't there."

Her friends and family are trying to help. "Nobody knew how to handle it or what to say. My parents are trying to be supportive. But they can't help because they don't know how. This is not a joke and people have got to learn how to handle it."

Jane is finding a way to cope through individual counselling with a nutritionist and psychiatrist at a Halifax hospital.

"It's very scientific so it's better for me personally. Before I didn't know what the proper proportions (for weight and food) were," she explains.

But counselling services in Halifax are lacking. "Right now, the best situation for them to be in is university," says Wetmore.

"Some students come to our counselling office for help and some students are referred to us by Health Services. Health Services and Student Services are in the same area so it makes it easier sometimes for patients to come to us for help."

Treatment begins with learning how to eat properly. Then, the individuals and their doctors work together to find the reasons behind their eating problem. It

takes a long time to start a healthy routine and to deal with all the mixed emotions.

Now the problem is affecting more children at a younger age. Some experts put the blame on society's "thin is in" message to women.

"More education is needed because only a small percentage of the population can be the perfect image," says Elaine. "People are literally starving themselves to fit into this image. Something has got to be done to educate the public."

"Losing weight will not send away your men problems or any other problems," Jane says. "Besides, guys who are only interested in girls with the perfect weight are no good anyway."

Eating Disorder Awareness Week is October 23-29. For more information call 416-340-4156 or write to 200 Elizabeth St. CW 2-332, Toronto, Ontario, M5G 2C4.

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