

How to Detect Signs of Eating Disorders in Your Children

"It all started for me when I was 8 years old," a friend of mine recently shared. She said, "I would sit at the kitchen table looking at *Vogue* magazine and even *Victoria's Secret*."

She would look at the pictures of the women in the magazines and pick out the ones she thought were the prettiest. In her mind, it set an expectation that one day she should eventually look like the women in those photos. When she got a little older, she realized that she would never look like those girls or even the popular girls she saw in school. The image in the mirror was a disappointment to her because it didn't meet a standard of what she thought was pretty.

Unfortunately, comments about her looks, her weight in particular, from family and peers only reinforced the lies she was telling herself. Her mom would say, "Looks like you've gained weight" and "Do you think you should be eating that?" She began to feel guilty when she ate. The anorexia started when she decided to eat only every other day. When that didn't work in keeping her weight down, she started to binge and purge. This story is all too familiar for many of our daughters. Even in a households that do not reinforce the lies, it is still becoming all too common. If you are wondering if your daughter is showing signs of anorexia or other eating disorders, this will help you gain some insight.

Warning Signs

Signs of eating disorders are difficult to spot. They will deny it when asked and are probably good at hiding it. However, a good place to start is with their dieting and exercising habits. One girl I know used to tell loved ones that she was too busy to eat. Watch out if they start making

excuses for not eating or consistently skip meals. Listen carefully as they talk about their dieting. Are they obsessed with calorie count? If they go to the bathroom a lot during meals or right after, they may be throwing up. Look to see if their face and eyes are red.

According to the Mayo Clinic, other possible signs are complaining about being fat, constantly weighing herself, obsessing about bodily imperfections, poor dental health, and calluses on her knuckles.

Most people think anorexia is all about not eating or throwing up after meals (actually, that is bulimia), but it can entail over-exercising. This could be a difficult one to test, but see how they do emotionally if you suggest they skip their workout for the day.

The Drive for Perfection

Many of the girls that struggle with eating disorders are perfectionists. There's an ideal that they apply unnecessary pressure on themselves to achieve. Who's beauty ideal they are trying to reach is the question. If you have a daughter who is an achiever, you want to pay close attention. The goal of perfection is a relentless pressure, an unhealthy disposition, and an impossible pursuit.

Control

Many suffer from an eating disorder because they don't know how to deal with their feelings. The emotions of insecurity, fear, instability, anxiety, and pain make them feel out of control. Their weight is something they can control. They may also resort to cutting themselves. That way they can distract themselves from dealing with the stuff below the surface.

Self-Worth

Another cause is a low self-image. As was the case for my

friend, girls are fed a lie that they need to look a certain way. When they don't look the way they think they are supposed to look, they conclude that there is something wrong with them. They feel worthless and unlovable. The result is they go to dangerous lengths to something wrong with them. They feel worthless and unlovable. The result is they go to dangerous lengths to become what they, a boyfriend, their peers, parents, or society think they should look like.

Needs

Those who suffer from eating disorders need healthy ways to deal with pain and self-image. I would strongly suggest counseling. A professional can help identify the triggers and be able to suggest positive coping mechanisms. Second, a parent has the power to either debunk or reinforce the lies daughters are being told. The several girls I spoke to said that the thing they needed most and, in one case, what brought healing were parents who loved unconditionally. They need to be told that they are beautifully and wonderfully made just because of who they are. Tell her consistently and faithfully because the voice telling her the opposite is loud.

Not Just a Girl Issue

While the culture of beauty seems to hit girls more than boys, it's important to know that this is not just a girl issue. There are plenty of boys that struggle with eating disorders. A good (male) friend struggled with the disease so much that a doctor told him that if he continued the way he was going he would eventually die. Pay attention to the signs regardless of sex and get them help as soon as possible.

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