Eating Disorders Awareness: Introduction

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Eating disorders are complex disorders that can have serious or even fatal consequences if not treated appropriately. Eating disorders go beyond normal attitudes and behaviors surrounding food, weight management, exercise and body image. The symptoms are described as a continuum of behaviors and can be related to rigid or extreme food patterns, excessive exercise regimens, the use of laxatives, and vomiting in weight management. The onset of symptoms frequently manifests during adolescence but can affect a person across his or her lifespan. Eating disorders occur most commonly among females ages 13 to 30 years. However, the incidence of males suffering from eating disorders is rapidly increasing.

There are many influences on the development of eating disorders. They can arise from biological, social and psychological factors. The United States has a culture that views “thin” as the ideal rather than the exception. This view can result in feelings of a poor self-image and feelings of worthlessness.

Many times, eating disorders are identified in multiple family members. As a result, researchers are working to identify the possibility of genetic predisposition to eating disorders and the impact on recovery.

While no single event or factor causes an eating disorder, professionals agree that dieting precedes the onset of most eating disorders. People with eating disorders generally have a skewed view of their body, and they attempt to control their bodies to the point that doing so interferes with the normal functioning of their other life domains.

Early detection and intervention are key to the recovery from an eating disorder. Treatment goes beyond weight management and diet. Eating disorders are complex and require a team of professionals to successfully move the individual into recovery. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) describes eating disorders as a mental health disorder. Binge eating, anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa are listed as stand-alone diagnoses. Frequently, the treatment teams consist of professionals from the fields of medicine, mental health and nutrition. Treatment involves a combination of individual, group and family psychotherapy along with nutrition counseling under the watchful eye of a physician.

The “Eating Disorders Awareness” series of general fact sheets were written to help increase knowledge and awareness of the issues surrounding these illnesses.