

Does your daughter have an eating disorder? How can you help?

A handout for parents

You may have wondered why some young women develop eating disorders, including anorexia, bulimia and binge eating disorder. Perhaps you're concerned about your own daughter. Eating disorders are most likely to occur among women living in cultures and subcultures that emphasize thinness as a standard for beauty. We know that unhealthy efforts at dieting are a frequent precursor to the development of eating disorders. Overly restrictive diets, which can make a person feel ravenous, can set the stage for a repetitive cycle of eating large amounts of food while feeling out of control (i.e., binge eating) followed by wanting to get rid of the food (e.g., vomiting, laxatives, diet pills, extreme exercising).

However, the reasons why any particular young woman develops an eating disorder are complex. In addition to the hope of weight loss, young women embark on diets for a variety of reasons. For example, dieting can be used as a strategy to achieve "self-control." Further, dieting also can become a predictable and reassuring activity to focus on when a young woman feels overwhelmed by increasingly complex social and emotional challenges in her life. The risk of developing an eating disorder becomes greatly elevated if a young woman who is dieting in an unhealthy manner bases her self esteem on her appearance.

As a parent, we know you want your daughter to be happy and successful. In this culture, it can be extremely difficult not to equate thinness with happiness and many parents inadvertently put pressure on their children to be thin. The truth is, the unrelenting pressure that young women receive from others (e.g., friends, media, family) as well as from themselves to lose weight can cause great unhappiness.

Many parents find it difficult to deal with their daughters' weight/shape and appearance issues. If you think your daughter should lose weight, how do you tell her without being critical? And how do you decide if she should lose weight? Or maybe her weight is fine but she still goes from one diet to another and is obsessed about gaining weight? Should you worry? Is she exercising too

much? How do you know if she has an eating disorder? If you suspect that she does, what should you do?

We know the following from scientific research:

- Weight and shape concerns are very common among adolescents and can sometimes lead to eating disorders
- Even students who are comfortable with their weight and shape struggle with other issues of appearance
- The best way to lose weight or maintain your weight is through careful eating and exercise
- Criticism and teasing about weight and shape—is harmful

Self-Quiz: What Messages Are You Sending Your Daughter About Weight and Shape?

1. Do you tease your daughter about her weight and shape?
2. Do you make critical comments about your daughter's weight or shape?
3. Do you make positive comments about a friend's or celebrity's weight or shape?
4. Do you make unflattering comments or jokes about other people's weight or shape?
5. Do you talk about your own need to lose weight or make negative comments about your own size and shape?
6. Do you comment on women's figures?
7. Do you comment on or try to control what your daughter eats in an attempt to help her lose weight?

If you answered "no" to every question... By not making comments on your own or others' weight and shape, you are helping your daughter develop a healthy body image. It is likely that you already understand that commenting on other women's bodies can lead your daughter to develop an unhealthy body image.

If you answered "yes" to any of the questions... You may be surprised to learn that some of your behavior may encourage your daughter to adopt unhealthy attitudes about her weight and shape. Sometimes, com-

ments we make in front of our daughters can have unintentional and even dramatic consequences. For example, women who learn from their parents (and the media) to place a high value on being thin are at greater risk of developing an eating disorder. Many women with eating disorders report that their parents put them on their first diet.

Supportive Communication

When starting a conversation, open-ended questions are recommended. An open-ended question will give your daughter a chance to talk about her experiences without communicating judgment (e.g., "What have you learned in school about eating disorders?"). Asking, "Do you have an eating disorder?" may result in a simple "yes" or "no" response.

When we express our concern, we are wise to speak of our own experience (i.e., "I" statements) rather than assume we can figure the other person out (i.e., "you" statements). When we speak in "I" statements, we take responsibility for our response. For example, "I've heard you throwing up in the bathroom and I'm concerned."

When we speak in "you" statements, we tend to make judgments about the other person, leaving him/her feeling that he/she has to take a defensive position. For example, "You're too thin." or

"You need help." We end up locked in a battle of wills that leads nowhere. (If your daughter does suffer from an eating disorder, it is best to start treatment as soon as possible.)

This handout was excerpted from a newsletter handed out to parents as part of a Student Bodies high school program; author C. Barr Taylor, M.D., Stanford University. (See our lead story in *CABL* this month.) Student Bodies is designed to teach young women how to maintain their weight through healthy eating and exercise, challenge the myth that "thinness equals happiness," like and accept their bodies, and identify self-esteem and happiness through many activities in their lives. See <http://bml.stanford.edu/mcknight/> for the full newsletter, including resources.

The Brown University
Child and Adolescent
Behavior Letter

CABL



BROWN

Editor: Gregory K. Fritz, Ph.D.

Editor's Note: Subscribers are permitted to photocopy multiple copies for patients and colleagues who would benefit from the material. Not for resale or mass distribution. Executive Editor: Karienne Stovell, kstovell@wiley.com. For reprint information, contact the reprint coordinator at (201) 748-6011. *The Brown University Child and Adolescent Behavior Letter*, © 2006 Wiley Periodicals, Inc., A Wiley Company.
