

TEEN EATING DISORDERS



All teens are concerned about how they look. They want to be attractive and to fit in with others. But meeting society's standards for looking good isn't always easy, especially for girls. Girls are judged by their appearance more than boys are, and the standards are high. As always, physical attractiveness in females is based on pretty features, a good complexion, nice hair, and a well-proportioned body. Today, however, "well-proportioned" is popularly interpreted to mean thin. As a result many teenage girls are unhappy with their bodies. This is especially true of those who, because of pressures or problems in their own lives, become fixated on weight as a way of achieving success or happiness.

Women are far more likely than men to be unhappy with the way they look, and their weight is the biggest reason why. The worrying starts early. Nearly half of all 13-year-old girls say they don't like their looks. By 18, it's up to 80 percent.

Health professionals recognise three types of eating disorders. One is anorexia nervosa, in which a person has an irrational fear of getting fat and diets to the point of starvation. The second type of eating disorder is bulimia. A person eats large quantities of food and then throws up, takes laxatives, or uses other ways to avoid gaining weight. Third is compulsive eating, or binge eating. A compulsive eater eats large quantities of food, or binges, even when not physically hungry. Most experts believe these pressures are important reasons why so many girls develop eating disorders. Other reasons are found in the individual herself. These can include obsessive striving for perfection, low self-esteem, depression, conflicts over issues of control, family problems, discomfort with a changing body and psychological or social traumas.

Can anything be done to prevent eating disorders? By working together, teenagers, parents and teachers can bring about healthier eating habits.