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Disordered Eating: How It Relates to Eating Disorders and Mental Health

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I've discussed disordered eating in the first part of my two-part series on the subject, [What Is Disordered Eating?](#) but how does disordered eating relate to eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia, or other terms like emotional eating and compulsive eating?

Each person will define them somewhat differently, but in general, it appears that disordered eating can encompass other terms like emotional and compulsive eating, whereas eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia are actual mental disorder diagnoses.

<< Disordered eating and other eating disorders >>

Amy Bourdo, the executive director of the Eating Disorder Foundation, said in an email that these terms share many similarities, but they do have some differences.

“Although disordered eating shares signs and symptoms with compulsive eating and eating disorders, one’s behavior is not to the extent that they would be diagnosed with having an eating disorder,” Bourdo said. “However, without intervention it could take on a life of its own, possibly turning into a full-blown eating disorder.”

Her definition of disordered eating is in my first article. Here are her own definitions of compulsive eating and eating disorders:

“Compulsive eating involves an irresistible impulse to decrease emotional distress through the behavior of uncontrolled eating or binging,” Bourdo said.

“Activities of daily living can be mildly to severely impaired. An eating disorder is an irresistible impulse to manage overwhelming emotions through controlling food that leads to a highly disturbing preoccupation with food and weight control that impairs their activities of daily living to a significant degree.”

Renee Clauselle, the founder and head psychologist of the company Child and Family Psychology, and the founder and director of School Mental Health at St. John's University, said in an email that eating disorders are actual diagnoses, in comparison to disordered eating, which is unhealthy eating behaviors.

"Anorexia Nervosa and Anorexia Bulimia are the most common examples of eating disorders," Clauselle said. "Anorexia Nervosa is a serious and life threatening eating disorder that must be medically diagnosed by a physician. Resulting energy and essential nutrients deficiencies lead to death by self-starvation."

Karen Koenig, a licensed clinical social worker, an expert on the psychology of eating and the author of "Nice Girls Finish Fat," defines both compulsive and emotional eating.

"I consider compulsive eating done on automatic (ie, finishing off a bag of chips while watching a ballgame)," Koenig said. "Emotional eating is turning to food to avoid or minimize uncomfortable feelings."

Bonnie Brennan, the clinical director of Eating Recovery Center's Adult Partial Hospitalization Program, associated compulsive eating with emotional eating.

"Compulsive eating is the behavior of eating to meet emotional needs," Brennan said. "It's not necessarily about hunger of the body, more about hunger for love and acceptance, peace and contentment or even the expression of anger."

Jessica Setnick, the director of training and education for Ranch 2300 Collegiate Eating Disorders Treatment Program, said in an email that compulsive eating could be related to biology just like eating disorders.

"[Compulsive eating is] a type of disordered eating that can also morph into an eating disorder in the person with the biological propensity, where a person feels that they cannot stop eating or they feel compelled to eat to relieve a chemical imbalance caused by stress," Setnick said.

<< How disordered eating and other eating disorders affects mental health >>

Bourdo said that eating disorders, disordered eating and compulsive eating all impact mental health in similar ways but at different levels. Here is a list from Bourdo of some mental health side effects of disordered eating:

- 1) Guilt
- 2) Depression
- 3) Self-critical/ Judgmental
- 4) Anxiety
- 5) Feeling not enough
- 6) A pre-occupation with food that detracts from work or family life
- 7) Self-conscious/insecure

- 8) Withdrawing/isolating from friends and family
- 9) Rigid - all or nothing thinking
- 10) Physiological fuzzy thinking
- 11) Lying that comes with trying to hide it/guilt
- 12) Withdrawing from positive influences

Clauselle said that mental health can actually impact eating behaviors as well, not just the other way around.

“All in all, depression, low self esteem and low body [satisfaction] all play a part in how we eat, what we choose to put in our mouths, and how we live our lives,” Clauselle said.

There are many mental health issues associated with disordered, or disregulated, eating, Koenig said.

“Mental health and disregulated eating are intertwined through stress, trauma, childhood abuse and/or neglect, depression and anxiety,” she said.

Although disordered eating can be associated with mental health issues, this isn’t necessarily always the case, Brennan said.

“Our relationship to food and our body is intertwined with our mental health,” she said. “We experience emotions through physical sensations in our bodies. It makes sense that people would try to control the feeling of emotions in their body through the use of food, restriction of food or the undoing of food to get relief from problems and pain.”

<< Women and disordered eating >>

Clauselle said that women can be more prone to eating disorders for three main reasons:

1) “Overpacked schedules. Whether women are career focused or a mom driving a kiddie cab, we are endlessly working and keeping active social lives. It is no wonder that we can be vulnerable to falling into irregular and poor eating habits.”

2) “Depression, Isolation. Once women get in a rut of poor eating it is hard to get out, as it affects so many areas of our lives, including low energy. Naturally then we don't want to work out; our self-esteem, how we feel about ourselves and looks, may plummet, which can lead to depression and isolation. Hormones don't make it any easier. Studies have found that depressed women have a more difficult time problem solving when stressful situations occur, especially when those situations include what to eat and when to eat. If one is feeling tempted to engage in an unhealthy eating behavior, they may have less tools available to them to get them out of that way of thinking.”

3) “Body Image. There is a lot to suggest unhealthy and dangerous eating habits can result from our body image and how we perceive ourselves. A recent study found that young women involved in insecure relationships that produced anxiety for them were more likely to develop poor body image and poor eating habits.”

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