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Help for Eating Disorders

By Carol Ann Brannon, MS, RD, LD

Eating disorders involve extreme disturbances in eating behaviors – following rigid diets, gorging on food in secret, throwing up after meals, obsessively counting calories. But eating disorders are more complicated than just unhealthy dietary habits. At their core, eating disorders involve distorted, self-critical attitudes about weight, food, and body image. It's these negative thoughts and feelings that fuel the damaging behaviors.

People with eating disorders use food to deal with uncomfortable or painful emotions. Restricting food is used to feel in control. Overeating temporarily soothes sadness, anger, or loneliness. Purging is used to combat feelings of helplessness and self-loathing. Over time, people with eating disorders lose the ability to see themselves objectively and obsessions over food and weight come to dominate everything else in life.

Myths about Eating Disorders

Myth #1: You have to be underweight to have an eating disorder. People with eating disorders come in all shapes and sizes. Many individuals with eating disorders are of average weight or are overweight.

Myth #2: Only teenage girls and young women are affected by eating disorders. While eating disorders are most common in young women in their teens and early twenties, they are found in men and women of all ages.

Myth #3: People with eating disorders are vain. It's not vanity that drives people with eating disorders to follow extreme diets and obsess over their bodies, but rather an attempt to deal with feelings of shame, anxiety, and powerlessness.

Myth #4: Eating disorders aren't really that dangerous. All eating disorders can lead to irreversible and even life-threatening health problems, such as heart disease, bone loss, stunted growth, infertility, and kidney damage.