

We Underestimate Deadly Eating Disorders



About 1.2 million of the roughly 30 million people suffering from eating disorders in the United States will lose their lives to their afflictions.

By UConn School of Nursing student CASSANDRA ARPIN

It's vital for all of us to recognize eating disorders and help sufferers get help #anorexia #bulimia

In seventh grade, I had a friend who was struggling to find acceptance and self-worth. Her mother was a "recovered" anorexic and my friend found herself acquiring her own disordered eating habits.

Little did I know, this was just the beginning of her 6-year battle involving food, control and attaining the perfect body.

Although eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia have the highest mortality rate of any mental illness, their severity is often underestimated by society. Of the 30 million current sufferers in the United States, roughly 4 percent will lose their battle with an eating disorder. Four percent may not sound like a lot, but that comes out to 1.2 million deaths if you do the math.

For years, my friend's parents told her, "You don't have an eating disorder. You're at a healthy body weight, and you're definitely not sick enough to need help." Individuals of any shape or

size can be a victim of an eating disorder, although we often associate these illnesses with low weight and a thin body. This is a false perception of these diseases. The status of a person's eating disorder is much more significant than his or her overall appearance. As long as a person's eating habits and behaviors are disordered, the individual needs to be diagnosed and treated for one of these illnesses.

The lack of understanding about eating disorders means we often view individuals with these illnesses as "choosers" of their diseases instead of victims. The absence of conversation concerning anorexia and bulimia clearly illustrates just how disordered our world is about food, and how ignorant people are about these mental illnesses.

Too often, it is assumed that once people with eating disorders receive treatment, they are cured; they are never troubled by negativity involving food and exercise. The truth is, eating disorders are addictions and an addict is never truly free. Sufferers fight a constant battle against relapse.

Just think about the recovery process of an alcoholic. An alcoholic must avoid alcohol in order to remain sober. For people who've had an eating disorder, the whole world feels like one huge bar, and they are, like alcoholics, tempted by every step. Individuals may not act on their thoughts once they recover, but these thoughts are always present and must be silenced. Contrary to common beliefs about eating disorders, the road to recovery is lifelong and does not end after treatment. Many who have suffered with an eating disorder will always have difficulty having a slice of pepperoni pizza or going to a buffet with friends, even long after treatment and they are considered recovered. Others who talk nonstop about their diets and weight can make life that much harder for their formerly anorexic and bulimic friends.

Due to the cultural misunderstanding of eating disorders, idealization of thinness and lack of funding for research and treatment, individuals are often unable to perceive the gravity of their illness or to seek assistance on their own. Victims are losing their battles to these diseases every day. Society is to blame when a person becomes so physically and mentally ill from one of these disorders that they need immediate medical help.

A person's condition should not need to become critical to receive treatment. By increasing funds for research and getting to know the facts about these disorders, we can gain knowledge and acquire the power to impact the lives of others — friends, loved ones, and even strangers — who may be suffering. As a student nurse and friend of an eating disorder survivor, it is so important that we take the time to recognize just the danger of these mental illnesses. If you or someone you know is struggling with an eating disorder, it's time to seek help. Talk to your doctor or call the National Eating Disorders Association toll-free hotline: 1-800-931-2237. Recovery is possible, and it's definitely worth it.

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