By Lauren Muhlheim

Eating disorders are serious mental disorders affecting particularly adolescent girls and young women, but also older women, boys and men, at increasing rates over the last 30 to 40 years. The two main ones are anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa.

Anorexia nervosa is characterized by failure to maintain a healthy body weight, intense fear of gaining weight, and distorted body image.

Bulimia nervosa is characterized by recurrent and frequent episodes of eating unusually large amounts of food (e.g., binge-eating), and feeling a lack of control over the eating.

This binge-eating is followed by a type of behavior that compensates for the binge, such as purging (e.g., vomiting, excessive use of laxatives or diuretics), fasting and/or excessive exercise.

Unlike people with anorexia, people with bulimia can have weight within the normal range for their height and age.

Early intervention is critical. If not identified or treated in their early stages, eating disorders can become chronic and cause serious or even life-threatening medical problems. Anorexia nervosa has the highest death rate of any mental illness: between five and 20 percent of people who develop the disease eventually die from it.

Complex conditions

Eating disorders are complex conditions that are believed to arise from a combination of factors including genetic, physical, psychological, interpersonal and social issues. Dieting can contribute to or trigger the development of an eating disorder. Parents, educators and physicians can help in the prevention of eating disorders by modeling and encouraging healthy but flexible eating, and discouraging dieting. It is also helpful to talk to children and teens about the unrealistic images they see in the media.

If an eating disorder develops, early diagnosis and intervention can significantly enhance recovery. According to the National Eating Disorder Association (NEDA), “the most effective and long-lasting treatment for an eating disorder is some form of psychotherapy or counseling, coupled with careful attention to medical and nutritional needs. Ideally, this treatment should be tailored to the individual and will vary according to both the severity of the disorder and the patient’s individual problems, needs, and strengths.”

Among the most promising treatments for eating disorders are cognitive-behavioral therapy and family-based therapy for adolescent eating disorders. These treatments are empirically-validated in clinical trials.

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