

Eating Disorders In College

By Mary Anne Knapp, LCSW,
Clinical Social Worker for the Center for Counseling and Psychological Services

February 22nd to 29th is National Eating Disorder Awareness Week. Therefore, it is particularly important to take time to consider the impact of eating disorders – especially on Penn State students.

The Extent of the Problem

The culture of thinness and fat phobia combined with the explosion of foods, the complexity of life issues, and the intensity of developmental tasks make eating disorders and “body battling” a serious problem on college campuses.

“In the United States, *conservative estimates* indicate that after puberty, **5-10%** of girls and women (that translates to **5-10 million** girls and women) and **1 million** boys and men are struggling with eating disorders including anorexia, bulimia, binge eating disorder or borderline conditions (Crowther et al, 1992; Fairburn et al., 1993; Gordon, 1990; Hoek, 1995; Shisslak et al., 1995).*

Those with eating disorders share a sense of fear and terror of food and weight gain and often experience a sense of loss of control. They feel self critical or obsessive and have a conditional or negative sense of self. Behaviorally, they use food in unhealthy ways (either starving and restricting or bingeing). Because of the secretive nature and shame associated with eating disorders, many cases go unreported. In addition many people struggle with body dissatisfaction and sub-clinical eating disorder attitudes and behaviors. For example, **80%** of American women are dissatisfied with their appearance (Smolak, 1996).” *Taken from Eating Disorder Awareness and Prevention materials.

If we apply national figures to Penn State’s population, easily **1,000–2,000 Penn State women and 50–200 men** have full blown eating disorders while countless more have borderline or subclinical levels of eating disorders. According to national statistics approximately **16,000 Penn State women** will experience body discomfort and lowered self-esteem. In a *Penn State Pulse* random survey of the student body, conducted by Student Affairs Research and Assessment Unit during Spring semester of 2001, 34% of students said that they had a close friend or family member with an eating disorder and 16% said they had witnessed another student struggling with eating disorders.

Who Is At Risk for Developing an Eating Disorder?

Eating disorders have numerous causes. The culture and media set expectations for unrealistic thinness. Bodies are battlegrounds and eating disorders are rampant when social expectations pressure people, especially young women, to be thinner than they can normally be. As a result, women represent 90-95% of those with eating disorders. Biological factors such as family history of depression, eating disorders or alcoholism also increase a student’s risk for developing an eating disorder.

Certain psychological, family, and social group traits and experiences also play a role in increased risk. At this point in time, it is fairly common for counselors at the Center for Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) to see students whose parents struggled with eating disorders in college and even into adulthood. This multi-generational eating disorder pattern is a relatively recent phenomenon.

Exposure to perfectionist and rigid standards especially related to appearance, experiencing chaos and abuse in relationships, and even enmeshed and overprotective relationships, all make it more difficult for students to avoid the cultural pressure for thinness regardless of the cost. Body traumas such as being overweight and stigmatized as a child, or experiencing sexual abuse, also increase vulnerability for developing eating disorders. Finally, certain sports and social groups that emphasize thinness have a higher incidence of eating disorders among their participants and members.

How Do Eating Disorders Start and Develop?

What starts as a desire to lose a few pounds or engage in healthier eating according to the latest low fat or low carb diet can “start the ball rolling” for the development of eating disorders. In addition, food is a comfort and can act as a sedating drug for some who turn to it in order to deal with the anxieties of academic and college social life. The challenge of restricting food offers another focus of energy and attention that is straightforward and measurable at a time when life may feel too complex and overwhelming. Controlling food and weight may feel like a major accomplishment and provide a sense of control. Students may receive positive attention for their weight loss, which further reinforces their interest in losing even more weight. For some vulnerable students, the dieting mind set and dieting behaviors as well as use of purging methods such as laxatives, vomiting and excessive exercising can become a vicious and increasingly entrenched cycle. It can feel like a 24-hour obsession that leads to loss of focus for other aspects of their lives.

What to Do if You're Concerned About a Student

- 1) Set aside a time to talk** privately and respectfully about your concerns in a caring and straightforward way. Try to pick a time when you won't be distracted or pressured for time.
- 2) Listen closely.** Encourage your student to talk about the struggles they are experiencing adjusting to college or feeling good about themselves. Even though students might not feel comfortable talking about their eating disorder behaviors, they may be able to share their anxieties about doing well or their recent discouragements.
- 3) Communicate your concerns with behavioral examples and in a non judgmental way.** Avoid placing shame, blame, or guilt for the student's actions or attitudes. This will only cause the student to clam up.
- 4) Explain that you think these things may indicate a need for professional help.** Offer to find out about services on campus and support your student by helping them to make an appointment and explore insurance coverage for private treatment. Offer to accompany them if it seems like this will help them get started in treatment.
- 5) Get help and support for yourself** if you are struggling about how to proceed or find that you're worried. Consider reading self help books such as [Surviving an Eating Disorder: New Perspectives and Strategies for Family and Friends](#) by Michele Siegel, Judith Brisman and Margot Weinschel.

What Does Penn State Have to Offer?

To address eating issues and body dysphoria, units of Student Affairs at Penn State offer services and programming targeted to educate the student body and treat students with eating disorders. The following are some resources to consider:

The Center for Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) offers initial assessments, group therapy, short term individual counseling, psychiatric services (for students who might benefit from medication), and assistance with referrals for long term and specialty services. CAPS staff can consult with family and friends about how to proceed to encourage a student to come for help. CAPS is located in 221 Ritenour Building and can be reached by phone at 863-0395 to schedule appointments.

University Health Services (UHS) offers health care including physical exams, lab work and medical follow up. UHS is located on the first floor of Ritenour Building. Appointments can be made by calling 863-0774 for General Medicine or 863-2633 for Women's Health.

Also at University Health Services, Nutrition counseling is offered by a registered dietician and supervised nutrition students at the **Nutrition Clinic**. The Nutrition Clinic is located in 235 Ritenour. Phone number is 863-7414.

The Office of Health Promotion and Education, CAPS, Residence Life and the Center for Women Students offer public lectures, theatre programs, workshops, and informational campaigns for students about eating disorders, body image, and self esteem.

On February 24th there will be a program called *Sex Sells: Body Image, Culture and the Media* at 7 p.m. in 304 HUB. Dr. Elizabeth Reyes, CAPS Psychologist and Jaime Fenton, CAPS Graduate Assistant will present the program as a National Eating Disorder Awareness Week activity.