

Body image phobias can lead to eating disorders

By Sandra Omand
SPECIAL TO THE BEAVER

Careless comments about being too fat, combined with the impossible physical standards set for women by the media, could set your child up for a life threatening eating disorder.

Dr. Gail McVey, director of the Ontario Community Outreach Program for Eating Disorders and an assistant professor in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Toronto, said parents need to be very careful about what message they are sending their children.

McVey, speaking to 50 people at an information evening held recently at St. Thomas Aquinas Secondary School, told the mostly adult audience that girls as young as seven are complaining they feel fat and have to lose weight.

"We are living in a very fat phobic and thin obsessed society," said McVey. "Children and teens tend to adopt the adult values around weight and shape so they learn very quickly in life that thin means good and fat means bad."

Because of this she said parents should be aware of the comments they make about their own body, and about other people's bodies, to carefully avoid perpetuating stereotypes and prejudices.

They should also guard against expressing guilt when they eat certain foods.

"A lot of the messages intended for adults the youth hear but they think more in extremes," said McVey. "With adults we can kind of muster through this information and make some informed decisions for ourselves but teens rarely do. They see one thing that says lower your fat intake and they go down to zero."

Added to this is the daily bombardment of images on television, billboards and in magazines of thin women, like super model Kate Moss, that imply if you are thin you will have success, good relationships and be socially accepted.

"The media pushes the idea that what you see in the mirror is the only important part," said McVey. "You

must be taller, thinner, and have perfect teeth and hair."

McVey said many of the models themselves suffer from eating disorder, as being 5'10" and weighing 105 to 115 pounds is not normal.

Furthermore many of the images teens and adults are comparing themselves to are not even real.

McVey said with computer assisted technology an image of the top half of an adult model can be (and is being) superimposed on teen-aged hips and legs.

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Another trick is to take an image of a real person and make so many changes that McVey said you are not even dealing with a real woman any more.

She said she has had clients who have taken 100 laxatives three times a day in an attempt to get this "ideal" figure.

The result, according to a fact sheet prepared by the Ontario Ministry of Health, is there are 85,000 people diagnosed with anorexia and bulimia in the province while thousands more remain undiagnosed and refuse to seek medical care.

About 20% of these young people will die, usually from heart failure that occurs after starvation has weakened the muscles surrounding the heart.

"They are literally dying to be thin," said McVey.

What is worse is they are fighting a losing battle.

McVey said the set point theory states that genes determine what your

body will be like as an adult. This means that, just as you have no control over how tall you will be or what colour your eyes and hair are, you also have no control over your body shape and size.

"You are going to look more like your parents than your neighbour's parents," said McVey.

Set points vary for each individual and when a person diets the body fights to maintain this natural weight range.

McVey said that yo-yo dieting (a cycle of severely restricting calories then returning to previous eating patterns with a corresponding loss and gain of weight) is much more severe to your health then staying at your natural weight throughout your life.

"Heavy people who exercise can be healthier and live longer than slim couch potatoes," said McVey.

While McVey said girls in elementary school grades are already talking about feeling fat — unlike their male counterparts — they do not start to do anything about it until they hit puberty.

By high school McVey said 90% of females are dieting in some form.

This is why she feels early prevention is crucial.

McVey said girls need to be prepared for the natural increases in weight and fat that occur while going through puberty. They also need to develop a positive body image and self-esteem.

McVey said young girls facing the double stress of puberty and changes to their social relationships, who also tend towards perfectionism, will be more likely to indulge in a severe form of eating disorder.

Early warning signs that a teen is headed for trouble is: over or underestimating size of their body; talking about feeling fat or ugly; talking negatively about parts of the body; worries about being too small, large, etc.; ashamed or embarrassed by appearance, size, height, physical maturity and "over does it" with physical activity; and restriction of food intake.

Unusual eating habits, irregular menstrual periods, mood swings, guilt or shame about eating, strict avoidance of certain foods, particularly "fatten-



Photo by Barrie Erskine

Dr. Gail McVey, director of the Ontario Community Outreach Program for Eating Disorders and assistant professor in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Toronto, emphasis a point in a speech about eating disorders.

ing" ones, feeling "fat" when not overweight are also warning indicators.

McVey recommends parents emphasize from an early age what your body does for you and how strong you feel in your body rather than what you look like.

She also recommends avoiding labeling food good or bad because when children eat food they have been told is "bad" they think they are being

bad. "Instead of saying don't have any more of that its junk food, or its bad food, say well, you've had the cookies and the bread today, so it looks like you might need to catch up on your vegetables and fruit," said McVey.

Children should also be discouraged from weighing themselves and McVey recommends getting rid of any household scales.

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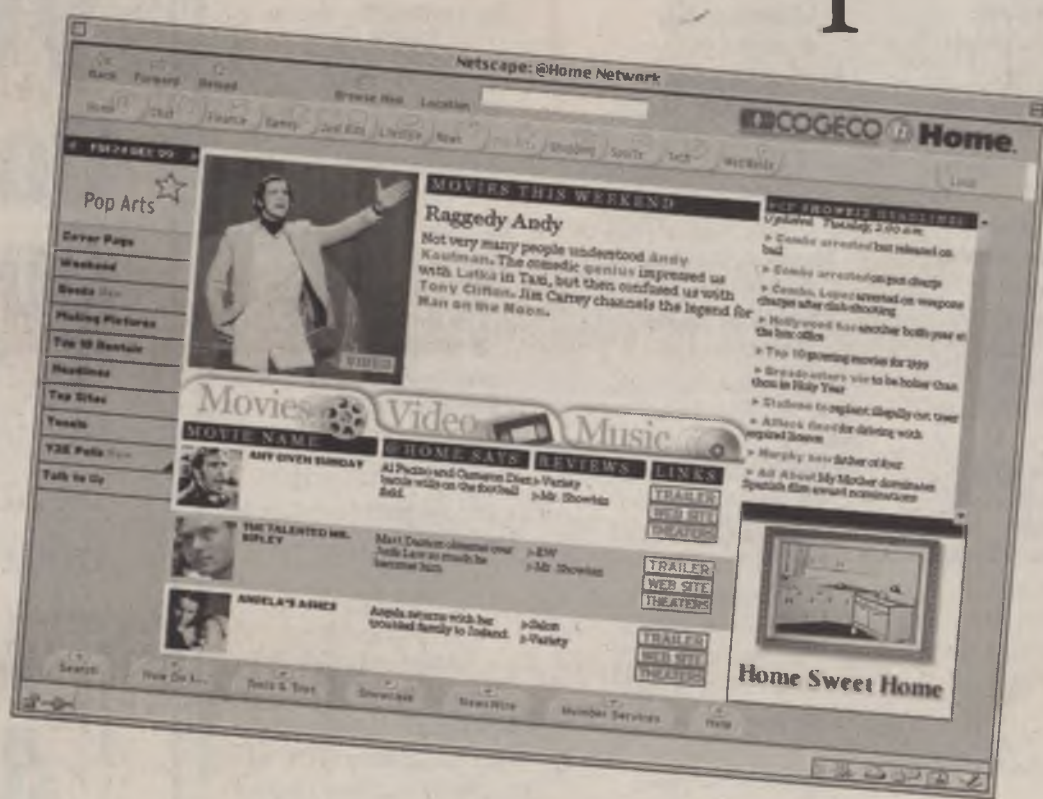
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