

# Cultivate your mind

## Food & Weight Preoccupation During Midlife

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Never before has there been such a focus for young and old alike on physical appearance as a marker of success and belonging. A cultural ethos of "self-improvement" dominates our bookshelves and our airwaves. Who can resist this? As women in midlife, we face challenges to our identities and self-concepts as a result of biological changes, life events and a culture in which healthy, strong images of older women are largely absent. For those of us who are unable to maintain a healthy self-image, the idea that taking control over one's body as a means of controlling one's life is seductive.

Eating disorders and weight preoccupation can and do affect individuals of all ages, classes, racial and ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations, abilities and occupations, although girls and women make up 85 to 95 percent of those diagnosed with clinical eating disorders. The most common age of diagnosis for eating disorders among women is between the ages of 14 and 25. However, studies revealed that

individuals in their seventies can exhibit attitudes and behaviours congruent with eating disorders, with one study reporting a first-time diagnosis of anorexia nervosa for a woman in her early nineties.

While the dangers associated with eating disorders for teenaged girls are widely known and well-documented, the fact that approximately 79 percent of deaths related to anorexia occur in individuals over 45 years of age is not well reported. Researchers have paid relatively little attention to midlife women as a population for whom disordered eating is a serious problem.

When a woman in midlife is diagnosed with an eating disorder, it is usually one of three problems. She may have had a history of disordered eating but never received appropriate diagnosis and intervention. She may have been diagnosed and received treatment earlier in life and is returning to or continuing her previous eating disorder behaviour. Or, as an adult she may have turned for the first time to self-harming manipulation of food and weight.

Disordered eating patterns are complex conditions with multiple causes - social, individual, familial and biological

factors all contribute in unique ways to developing and maintaining eating disorders in specific individuals. Consequently, disordered eating is not just a problem with food and weight. Rather it can be seen as a complex expression of how an individual sees herself in the world and a response to how she experiences that world.

Our vastly increased access, awareness and knowledge of issues related to food and weight preoccupation, as well as the right to self-care, is in our favour. This, combined with many years of life experience, allow us to determine the values that we hold dear and stand us in good stead. All of these things can help us put physical appearance and its manipulation into perspective, both for ourselves and the women and men in our spheres of influence.

**Note:** Age-related anorexia is a term frequently used to describe the loss of appetite among elderly individuals, and is not to be confused with anorexia nervosa, which includes deliberate control over food and weight as a means of gaining psychological rewards.

### How You Can Help

If you think someone you know has an eating disorder:

- know the warning signs of an eating disorder
- let the person know that you are concerned and that you are there to help
- focus on the person's overall well-being, not on food and weight
- find out what services are available in your area
- learn as much as possible about eating disorders; the more you know, the more you can help
- be a friend, a parent, etc., and not a policewoman
- be patient and compassionate; overcoming food and weight issues takes time and courage.

This is a small excerpt from a larger article. For more information, please contact

**nedic**

NEDIC (National Eating Disorder Information Centre) at 1-866-633-4220 or visit [www.nedic.ca](http://www.nedic.ca)

### Top Eight Tips for Session Success!

1. Plan your programs based on what is of interest to your community and your ideal new member. Ask your family/friends what they would like to learn about.
2. Personal invitations are always best. Invite people to come to your meetings, programs and to join your Branch.
3. Don't forget to get feedback from your guests! For example, hand out an evaluation to be filled in or provide a comment box. Ask the people attending your events what other topics they would be interested in for a future session then plan your next session on that topic and invite the same people.
4. If you have an evaluation form, include a section on the sheets for people to leave their contact information if they are interested in being a member (Ex. "If you are interested in joining our Branch, please provide us your contact information).
5. Don't leave the task of planning an event to one person - put together a planning committee.
6. Do not give up after you have tried once! Try again, you will be amazed at how your events can grow with persistence.
7. Partner with other WI Branches/Districts to plan your sessions - share resources, ideas and the workload.
8. Most importantly, make it fun! Don't forget to include social activities and the opportunity to have fun. One of the main reasons members indicate that they join WI is for fun and friendship.