

Feelings, not food, drive eating disorders

Belinda Shields looks into the fridge and literally breaks into a sweat. Just thinking about what to eat, when to eat and how much, strikes terror into the 17-year-old.

Belinda is not alone. Eating disorders are now the third most common chronic illness in young Canadian girls: one in every four teenagers suffer from significantly disordered eating. Furthermore, eating disorders are also increasingly seen in women in midlife and in boys and men.

Whether the urge is to restrict eating, to binge, or any of a myriad concerns with food and weight, the real problem is not food, or even weight.

Individuals with eating disorders often describe a feeling of powerlessness. By manipulating their eating they blunt their emotions or get a false sense of control in their lives.

In this way, an eating disorder develops from a method of coping with the world. This coping, however, is merely a mask. It does not resolve the problems that the person is experiencing.

"Patterns of behaviour around food, exercise and weight management—which start as ways to feel better about oneself, to help structure or manage emotions and time—end up controlling the individual" says Merryl Bear, director of the National Eating Disorder Information Centre (NEDIC). "People don't start out

with the idea of getting an eating disorder".

Belinda's mother notes that, at first, going on a diet and losing weight made Belinda feel good: she was achieving a goal and also being complimented for her self discipline and weight loss by friends.

But over time, family meals became nightmarish as Belinda became more demanding about what she would—or would not—eat. At the same time, her common sense and physical health deteriorated rapidly.

"The lives of the person with the eating disorder, her family, and friends are all affected by this issue. Eating disorders are complex and life-threatening, affecting every aspect of an individual's life. However, the terrible thing is that the secrecy and shame that often surround having an eating disorder make it very difficult for the girls to reach

out for help", says Bear.

"My mom's help in understanding that it's not the food, it's how I feel, is what eventually got me into treatment." says Belinda.

Getting help for an eating disorder can start in the doctor's office, or by searching the directory online at www.nedic.ca. Bear points out that of the almost 3,000 individuals that they speak with each year, almost a third are seeking help on behalf of a family member.

—News Canada



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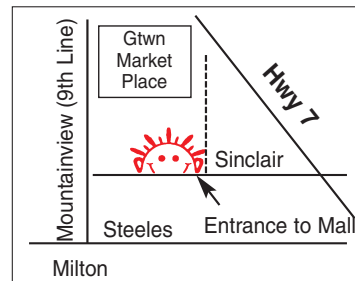
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