

BOYS, BODY IMAGE AND EATING DISORDERS

by Marcia Herrin EdD, MPH, RD and Nancy Matsumoto

The face of eating disorders has changed and is continuing to change. One of the most striking developments is that where once it was believed that about 10 percent of eating disorder sufferers were male, experts now put that figure at about 25 percent, or even higher. Their theory is that the rate of male eating disorders has always been higher than reported. But as these disorders have become more public, and the stigma attached to them has decreased, more males have begun seeking treatment.

The growing number of boys with both disordered eating and eating disorders should not come as a surprise when you consider the way that dieting and thinness are marketed as aggressively to men as they are to women today. Neither should the corresponding rise in body dissatisfaction that researchers have documented among boys and young men.

Here are some risk factors for boys that might predispose them to an eating disorder:

- Being chubby as children and/or experiencing teasing about body size.
- Having a higher-than-average body weight.
- Body dissatisfaction.
- Participating in high-risk sports that favor thinness or include weight classes, such as wrestling, boxing, crew, bodybuilding, weightlifting, gymnastics, figure skating, or long-distance running.
- Depression.
- Alcohol abuse.
- An obsession with sports performance.
- Losing dangerous amounts of weight through overexercise and limited food intake.
- Caring more about altering their body shape, becoming leaner and more muscular, than about weight loss.

PROTECTIVE FACTORS IN BOYS

Going through puberty can trigger an eating disorder in both boys and girls. Because boys reach puberty later than girls, however, they tend to develop eating disorders later, and so are better prepared emotionally to deal with physical changes. Boys also mature differently; they tend to become more satisfied with their body shape and size as they go through puberty, while girls tend to become less satisfied. One reason is that as boys mature they become more muscular, they shed fat, and they become taller. All of these changes make them feel better about their bodies. It's not hard to see why: these changes are more culturally desirable than the increase in body fat that girls experience.

SHAME AND INVISIBILITY: OBSTACLES TO TREATMENT

One concern about boys who are at risk for eating disorders is that their problems may go unnoticed because parents, teacher, coaches, and even doctors may believe that eating disorders are a “girl problem.” Although shame about male eating disorders is diminishing, it still keeps boys from admitting they have eating problems and keeps others from detecting those problems, even obvious ones.

BOYS CAN GET ANY TYPE OF EATING DISORDER

The paths that lead boys into eating disorders are varied, and they can lead to anorexia, bulimia, or binge-eating disorder. One of my patients, Conor, a bright and inquisitive boy who was homeschooled until he was 11, was excited about entering the local junior high school. Once there, though, he felt out of control and lost. Controlling his eating was his response to the distress. He became interested in calories, fat grams and losing weight because he needed something he could master, and there was no doubt he was good at losing weight. Conor was lucky. His doctor told him in no uncertain terms that he was too thin and needed to gain weight. Early intervention prevented his weight loss from turning into full-blown anorexia, but it easily could have gone that way. Another of my patients, Rod, learned about self-induced vomiting from his teammates on the crew team. When the season was over, the other boys stopped their disordered behaviors, but Rod could not.

BOYS AND THE “ADONIS COMPLEX”

A variation on male body image and eating problems is that of the person who shows increased interest in fitness, sports, and muscle building. Instead of feeling too large, he sees himself as smaller than he is, and feels ashamed of his perceived puny size. This can lead to overexercise, compulsive weight-lifting, and the use of dietary supplements to build muscles, even illegal and dangerous anabolic steroids. This complex of symptoms has been dubbed “The Adonix Complex” by researchers.

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