

Factors that may Contribute to Eating Disorders

Eating disorders are complex conditions that arise from a combination of long-standing behavioral, biological, emotional, psychological, interpersonal, and social factors. Scientists and researchers are still learning about the underlying causes of these emotionally and physically damaging conditions. We do know, however, about some of the general issues that can contribute to the development of eating disorders. NEDA acknowledges that there may be a difference of opinion among experts and in the literature on this topic, and we encourage readers to explore the topic further, using all reliable sources available to them.

While eating disorders may first appear to be solely about food and weight preoccupations, those suffering from them often try to use food and the control of food to cope with feelings and emotions that may otherwise seem overwhelming. For some, dieting, bingeing and purging may begin as a way to cope with painful emotions and to feel in control of one's life. Ultimately, though, these behaviors will damage a person's physical and emotional health, self-esteem and sense of competence and control.

Psychological Factors that Can Contribute to Eating Disorders:

- Low self-esteem
- Feelings of inadequacy or lack of control in life
- Depression, anxiety, anger, stress or loneliness

Interpersonal Factors that Can Contribute to Eating Disorders:

- Troubled personal relationships
- Difficulty expressing emotions and feelings
- History of being teased or ridiculed based on size or weight
- History of physical or sexual abuse

Social Factors that Can Contribute to Eating Disorders:

- Cultural pressures that glorify "thinness" or muscularity and place value on obtaining the "perfect body"
- Narrow definitions of beauty that include only women and men of specific body weights and shapes

- Cultural norms that value people on the basis of physical appearance and not inner qualities and strengths
- Stress related to racial, ethnic, size/weight-related or other forms of discrimination or prejudice

Biological Factors that Can Contribute to Eating Disorders:

- Scientists are still researching possible biochemical or biological causes of eating disorders. In some individuals with eating disorders, certain chemicals in the brain that control hunger, appetite, and digestion have been found to be unbalanced. The exact meaning and implications of these imbalances remain under investigation.
- Eating disorders often run in families. Current research indicates that there are significant genetic contributions to eating disorders.

Eating disorders are complex conditions that can arise from a variety of potential causes. Once started, however, they can create a self-perpetuating cycle of physical and emotional destruction. Successful treatment of eating disorders requires professional help. For more information see the NEDA handout “Treatment of Eating Disorders.”