

EATING DISORDERS IN MEN

An issue that demands attention

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“Undiagnosed and “untreated” are two words that can be used to describe eating disorders in men. Why is it like that? The answer is etched deep inside the patriarchal ideologies of our society. While men’s mental health, in general, is a difficult conversation itself, when it comes to more complex mental illnesses that directly influence the body, eating disorders cause a lot of severe damage.

“Many people think that an eating disorder is only related to food and body weight. But in reality, it’s deeply correlated with a patient’s psychological and physiological conditions,” says Fahmida Hashem, clinical nutritionist at Labaid Hospital and Diagnostics.

Misconceived notions of the “ideal” male body are a prime influencer of eating disorders in men. Due to high exposure to social media, adolescents and teenage boys are more likely to be fascinated and swayed by capitalistic marketing schemes targeted toward a young audience, leading to the risk of them developing an eating disorder due to the unhealthy obsession over a certain body type. Unattainable standards demonstrated on social media as the “ideal” body type distorts a person’s body image and leads to issues like muscle dysmorphia, which often stretches out to problems like abnormal eating patterns. Similar to women, the pursuit of extreme weight loss poses a significant threat to men, especially in certain high-risk groups like teenagers.

Among social factors, receiving inappropriate comments about one’s body often greatly influences eating habits. “I was told that I look like a matchstick and was questioned on if I even have rice in my meals, so I started to eat rice in all 3 of my meals of the day,” says Samridhya Sarker, an 18-year-old.

“I first realised I have an eating disorder when I started vomiting out every morsel of food during December of 2020. I cannot have more than one meal throughout the day so, even though I’m hungry I tend to minimise my intake which has caused my weight to drop even further. It has made me more tired and has made me go through my day with less energy than I could muster and my weight lower than it already was which has led to an insecurity of my image,” shares Tawsif Mahmud, a 23-year-old.

A person’s relationship with their family can influence the development of eating



PHOTOS: ORCHID CHAKMA



disorders in many ways. For example, a man may have grown up in a family where food was used as a coping mechanism for stress or emotions. Alternatively, a man may have grown up in a family where body

shaming or critical comments about appearance were common. This can lead to feelings of dissatisfaction towards one’s body and an unhealthy relationship with food.

Unreported accounts of trauma, such as being bullied and physical or sexual abuse, as well as the glorification of suppressing your emotions as a man are also issues that further fuel the risk of a man falling prey to unhealthy coping mechanisms. They resort to unsavoury eating patterns, such as binge eating to gain weight, as a means to prevent traumatic events from reoccurring.

An eating disorder affects a person in many ways, this includes, but is not limited to their loved ones, which may induce feelings of guilt and negative spirals in people suffering from an eating disorder. “Whenever he messes up at work or fails at something, he punishes himself by depriving himself of food. For people who care for him, this is hard to watch,” said Fariha Rahman*, a 25-year-old about her friend with an eating disorder.

Due to societal stigmas and gender norms, or simply because these things aren’t talked about enough, many men

feel ashamed for struggling with an eating disorder and refrain from getting the help they need, leading to feelings of isolation and loneliness that further perpetuate the cycle of disordered eating behaviors.

“Stigma and shame, co-occurring mental health conditions, and lack of awareness are prime obstacles for men who suffer from an eating disorder. The National Institute of Mental Health in Shyamoli has psychologists who specialise in Eating Disorders. Other than that, one can see a private psychologist with a history of treating ED patients in order to receive the best treatment. Among international resources, National Eating Disorder Association (NEDA), and The National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (ANAD) are credible websites that offer insight and support for Eating Disorder patients, especially for men,” adds Fahmida Hashem.

It’s crucial to receive treatment for eating disorders due to their harmful nature, for they affect people regardless of their gender. As eating disorders may vary in nature, it’s important to see a psychologist and a dietitian to get a proper medical diagnosis and a diet plan as well as to learn more from a medical professional on ways to combat disordered eating behaviors.

“The best someone can do to help with my journey is to not point it out. I don’t think talking about it will actively help me throughout the episode,” adds Tawsif.

“Family support is a matter of utmost importance when it comes to the development of an eating disorder. Parents have to

pay attention to the small changes in their child’s eating habits. Because they might be, and most of the time, they are, associated with a lot more than just their relationship with food. If the problem of an eating disorder gets severe, managing the physical complications becomes the first priority,” says Sharmin Haque, clinical psychologist at Square Hospitals.

To combat shame and embarrassment that can prevent men from seeking help for their eating disorders, it’s important to create a safe and supportive environment where they feel comfortable sharing their experiences. This can involve educating others on the prevalence of eating disorders in men and working to challenge stigmas and stereotypes associated with mental health struggles. It’s also necessary to challenge societal norms surrounding body image. By recognising and rejecting harmful beauty standards perpetuated by our society and the media, the meaning of a healthy body and self-image in men calls for redefinition.

References:

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2. Current Opinion in Pediatrics (August, 2020). *Eating Disorders in adolescent boys and young men: an update*

*Names have been changed on request

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