Understanding Eating Disorders

The term eating disorder actually refers to a group of conditions in which one becomes excessively preoccupied with food and weight. Although eating disorders are a mental/behavioral health concern, if left untreated, they can have serious physical health consequences.

At this point, experts do not know the exact cause of eating disorders, and in fact, there may be many causes that contribute to the development of an eating disorder. A few possible eating disorder causes include:

- **Genetics/Biology** – People with first degree relatives that have had an eating disorder may be more likely to develop one themselves.

- **Emotional/Behavioral Health** – Some people with eating disorders may also have concurrent behavioral health concerns such as low self-esteem, perfectionism, or impulsive tendencies that may contribute to the disorder.

- **Society** – There is no doubt that “pop culture” cultivates an image of thinness and perfection in the way we are “supposed” to look. Some researchers believe that this image we constantly see portrayed in the media fuels the desire to be extremely thin, contributing to eating disorders and/or an unhealthy relationship with food.

- **Activities** – According to the Mayo Clinic, athletes, actors, dancers, and models are at a higher risk of eating disorders, with the risk being particularly high for ballerinas, gymnasts, runners, and wrestlers.

There are three main types of eating disorder, each with their own symptoms and associated health problems including anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge-eating disorder.

**Anorexia Nervosa**

Anorexia is typically characterized by self-starvation and excessive weight loss. Approximately 90%-95% of anorexia sufferers are female and it is one of the most common psychiatric diagnoses in young women. Anorexia typically appears in early to mid adolescence.

Signs and symptoms of anorexia include:

- Intense fear or anxiety over gaining weight
- Obsession with body image
- Distorted body image – insisting that one’s self is “fat” even when they are clearly not
- Dramatic weight loss
- Refusal to eat/denial of hunger
- Food rituals (excessive chewing, rearranging food on the plate, etc)
- Excessive exercise
- Social withdrawal and irritability

It is important to treat anorexia as soon as it is discovered as it can lead to health problems such as:

For more information or support on eating disorders, contact the work/life experts at BalanceWorks® by calling:

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