

NAYA

NAYA | Eating disorder awareness: It's not what they eat, but what eats them

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BEIRUT: It's not about choosing to skip dinner that one night because you were too busy, it's not about reading the nutritional value on the back of your bag of chips, it's an all-consuming obsessive disorder that interferes in all aspects of sufferers' lives and can lead to death in many cases.

It is estimated by the Nation Eating Disorder Association that there are currently 70 million people worldwide suffering from eating disorders. Yet, this phenomenon remains stigmatized and regarded as normal diet behavior in its early stages. So when do eating disorders really get serious enough to be spoken about?

"What most people don't realize is that eating disorders are not choices, they are true disorders," Dr. Aimee Karam, Head of Psychology at MIND clinics and

president of the Lebanese Psychological Association, told Annahar. “There are internationally recognized criteria that distinguish eating disorder behavior, we call it a true disorder when it interferes significantly in the social, family, or personal life of the sufferer.”

Eating disorders don’t require a certain weight or shape to be valid. Sufferers can be underweight, average weight, or overweight. Still, the stereotype of a dangerously thin teenage girl is almost instantly associated with eating disorders causing stigma to other sufferers and the feeling like their disorders are not serious enough to seek help.

“You have many forms of eating disorders, but the most recognizable ones are Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia Nervosa, and Binge Eating Disorder,” said Dr. Karam, adding: “although they might share similar criteria, they are very different and can affect anyone.”

Statistics worldwide show that women are more prone to suffer from Anorexia with a ratio of one male sufferer per nine female sufferers predominantly at the ages of 12 and 13. Bulimia is more likely to occur later in adolescent women between the ages of 17 to 22 with a ratio of one male sufferer per seven female sufferers. Binge Eating Disorder usually is present in the early 20s predominantly, according to National Eating Disorder Association.

Anorexia Nervosa is the restriction of food intake usually accompanied by the fear of gaining weight, excessive exercise, and body dysmorphia. Bulimia shares similar characteristics but with a binge-purge cycle that reoccurs several times per day, and Binge Eating Disorder is the consumption of large quantities of food in one sitting until there’s physical discomfort followed by extreme feelings of self-disgust.

So how does one help a loved one suffering from an eating disorder? “The more you educate people about eating disorders, the more you can prevent extreme cases,” Dr. Karam said.

“You need to understand that this is not a choice, and one can’t be forced into therapy. You can’t offer a solution, and you can’t blame the sufferer or reinforce

guilt. What you can do is pinpoint the fact that this eating disorder is harming many aspects of the sufferer's daily life and remove some of the responsibility from the sufferer."

There are also factors that contribute to the severity of eating disorders that vary from household problems to clinical perfectionism, to emotional intolerance where one feels too anxious from everyday life and resorts to safety behavior which gives a sense of control and security.

Eating disorders are deadly and painful to both sufferer and people surrounding the sufferer, and shaming eating disorder sufferers brings nothing but stigma and hiding of the disorder which, can lead to catastrophic health problems and a delay in the recovery process. It's time to speak about people with eating disorders because it's not what they eat but what eats them.

Welcome to "Naya", the newest addition to Annahar's coverage. This section aims at fortifying Lebanese women's voices by highlighting their talents, challenges, innovations, and women's empowerment.

We will also be reporting on the world of work, family, style, health, and culture. Naya is devoted to women of all generations-Naya editor, Sally Farhat: Sally.farhat17@gmail.com

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