

Support, not Shame:

Confronting the Conversation on Eating Disorders



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We need to talk. No, we need to shout at the top of our lungs that this is not okay. It is time to begin a conversation about the unspoken pandemic that has plagued the world for centuries: eating disorders. Sympathized, yet abhorred. Pernicious, yet disregarded. I demand change. So, let us discuss.

One out of every 10 people are affected by eating disorders worldwide, according to the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (ANAD). To be clear, “eating disorders” (ED) is an all-encompassing term for any mental health disorder relating to negative emotions and behavior toward food, dieting and exercise. EDs are not just anorexia and bulimia. There are a range of disorders that can present themselves at any point in someone’s life. EDs are non-selective, as they affect people of all ages, genders, races and socioeconomic statuses. Their causes are as diverse as their victims; genetics, societal norms, environment and psychological health are all stimulating factors, according to writer Susan McQuillan.

The misconstrued conception that anorexia and bulimia are the only EDs emphasizes the lack of education afforded to this topic. Some EDs can fit into certain groups, while others are rather unique. For example, Breathe Life Healing Center and the Foundation for Research and Education in Eating Disorders (FREED) identify EDs that deal with self-inflicted food restriction as anorexia nervosa, diabulimia, selective eating disorder and avoidant or restrictive food intake disorder (ARFID). EDs that deal with purging of food include bulimia nervosa and rumination disorder. Muscle dysmorphia and body dysmorphic disorder are EDs that relate to an obsession over one’s body and appearance; EDs characterized by weight gain via extreme overeating are binge eating disorder and compulsive overeating (COE). These are just a select few from a large list comprising the many possible diagnoses.

Where can we start to fix this complex and misunderstood issue? Education. Cultivating a safe space for people from all walks of life to learn and have conversations about EDs is crucial if we are to destigmatize them.

Founded by Patti Geolat, Something for Kelly (SFK)

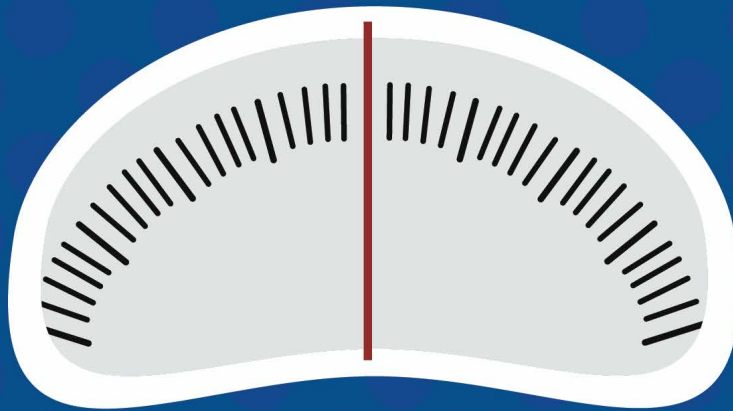
is an organization centered in educating people, particularly adolescents, on EDs. SFK travels across the country to middle and high schools, giving interactive seminars to students. This gives them the appropriate tools to start conversations about EDs. Ignorance is not bliss; many struggle with EDs and do not even know it because they were never introduced to them.

SFK hosts a radio program once a week discussing any and all aspects of EDs, like risk factors, current research advances and survivor’s stories. This is a continuation of the conversation. As essential as these conversations are, they need to include more people, especially young ones.

As mentioned, EDs are non-selective, affecting people of all genders, races and ages. However, adolescents are frequently the focal group of those affected. This group is also the target of many media outlets. Television shows, social media posts, podcasts and movies are very focused on reaching this age group. Whether or not the media depicts EDs in a way that is beneficial to this cause is the question at hand.

Numerous movies and TV shows simply do not acknowledge the fact that EDs exist nor their prevalence amongst the adolescents portrayed on screen. This affects how young viewers approach the idea of EDs, particularly when they have self-image issues, internal doubts and cravings to be validated by their favorite shows and movies. If they do not see that EDs are a problem for their favorite characters, they may feel isolated and invalid.

On the flip side, there are a few movies showing a very dramaticized aspect of EDs, such as “To the Bone.” These films have caused much controversy among parents and older generations, as they do not see this issue as “appropriate” for their children. Understandably, the explicit details may not be the way to introduce adolescents to EDs, and some shows undermine the gravity of this disorder by romanticizing it; however, children shouldn’t be shielded from this discussion either. The



overdramatization can cause young viewers to downplay their symptoms of EDs, allowing them to think they are not experiencing feelings nearly as severe as the characters on film. This may cause them to dismiss their feelings, which will progress their disorder to a possibly irrevocable stage marring their mental and physical health.

Not only that, but young males are rarely seen in the media depicting struggles with EDs. Males experience negative self-esteem issues just as much as anyone else. This can cause many boys to feel as though they are not allowed to have an ED—according to societal standards—and ignore any possible signs that they may have one, for fear of being labeled as “weak.”

A major medium on which EDs are dealt with is social media; accounts and pages provide an entirely new source of communication with younger generations. Editing apps and photo angles are only two of the many ways that people are able to adjust their photos to depict their body in the “most” acceptable way. This can lead to an abundance of developing adolescents feeling unworthy in comparison to the edited posts on their feed—simply because their body doesn’t match up to an unrealistic standard.

Fortunately, there are a couple social media pages that address the issue of EDs, particularly toward the group of individuals targeted by misrepresentative media posts. Accounts like @murraynutrition and @myselflovesupply on Instagram provide comfort to their followers struggling with EDs. They start conversations. This is hugely impactful on the minds of younger generations, as the media is coveted by them. Providing validation relieves some

of the stress and pain adolescents feel daily if they struggle in understanding what they are experiencing. Positive reinforcements like these, that promote body positivity and self love to adolescents, can persuade them to seek the help they need sooner rather than later.

What more can we do? Trust in science. Much research has already been done, but there is still so much more we don’t know. Not only does SFK partake in combating this pandemic via education and discussion, but also through science. SFK has contributed a great deal to the research and discovery of genetic predispositions for EDs. Partnered with the Eating Disorders Genetics Initiative (EDGI), SFK aims to bridge the gap between science and solution—and the results that they have unearthed already are promising. EDGI scientists discovered some people can be predisposed to acquiring an ED just based on their genetic buildup. This is just the beginning, as EDGI is studying other genetic connections, such as those between depression and anxiety.

Change will not happen unless we take accountability. It is our responsibility to raise our younger generations in a world where their experiences and feelings are legitimized. Share your opinion. Share your story. Participate in research efforts. Start the conversation. Have hope.

No more ignoring EDs because the topic is uncomfortable. No more condemning those facing the distressing effects of EDs. No more excuses. Educate yourself. Educate your children. Educate your friends. This conversation has just begun and, my word, we have a lot more that needs to be said.