

Understanding eating disorders in children

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Within the rich tapestry of Indian society, the role of food holds a very prominent position. Food is a fundamental component of every festival and an essential topic of discussion within every household. Childhood memories and special occasions, like birthdays, often revolve around exciting foods.

Away from the romance of this cultural narrative, a large number of Indian children and teenagers have a troubled relationship with food. There is no denying that food provides us with the nutrition and sustenance for our survival, yet for many children and young adults food has become the very thing that threatens their mental and physical well-being. It is extremely hard as a parent/guardian to observe concerns with food with your child and often concerns with eating are associated with teenage angst or with younger children behavioral concerns. There is a fine line between a passing phase and a concrete concern. Parents and guardians often struggle with this distinction. The fear of threat to the child's health often leads to unhelpful actions and confrontational conversations, which leave both child and adult feeling vulnerable and confused.

Popular narratives surrounding eating disorders reinforce ideas that there is a concern only when a child/adolescent stops eating and loses a drastic amount of weight. While this is not incorrect, there are many more medically identified eating concerns which have an equally negative impact on the physical and mental health of an individual (Rosen et.al. 2017). Recent studies suggest that while Anorexia affects more females than males, Binge Eating Disorder affects more males than females (F. Smink & D. Hoeken, 2012). This challenges the widespread belief that eating disorders primarily affects females.

Educate yourself:

Eating disorders is an umbrella term which holds conditions like Bulimia, Anorexia, Binge Eating Disorder, Pica, Rumination Disorder and Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder. It is advised that parents read (scientific based material) or talk to a professional before directly confronting their child. Eating disorders are often linked to ideas of self or inability to manage psychosocial pressures. By consulting with a professional - whether it is a pediatrician, psychiatrist or a child and adolescent psychologist - a parent/guardian can gain a better understanding of how to approach their concerns and prepare themselves for the child's responses.

Observe and Monitor:

When concerned about disordered eating, it is important to validate your concerns by monitoring your child's food intake and behavior. Restrictive food intake, voicing displeasure at majority of food items, poor self-esteem/confidence, emotional eating and spending long hours post meals in the bathroom or in a locked room are some of the possible indicators that your concerns are valid. It is imperative to keep in mind that these patterns must not be one off events but occur relatively frequently.

Further, it is helpful to monitor the child's social media use, constant checking of diet websites, joining pro- anorexia support groups, negative or self-deprecating Facebook statuses are all signs of concern.

A changing child:

Unfortunately, eating disorders do not only affect the body but the mind as well. Parents of children with eating disorders often report that their children seem withdrawn, ill-tempered and emotionally fragile. It is this disintegration of energy and eventually happiness is what parents find most alarming. Often, it is the change in personality and rigid thinking around food and eating that are the first indicators of potential concern/crisis.

While it is important to be aware and identify your child's potential eating disorder, I beseech parents and guardians to take a moment to reflect on why and how this concern has developed. Children and adolescents who suffer from eating disorders are often tormented by thoughts surrounding negative body image or feelings of having no control over themselves or their environment. These thoughts cast a shadow upon rational thinking, empathy and insight and leave the child often feeling isolated and trapped in their own cyclical thought patterns.

The prognosis for eating disorders vary depending on age and the type of disorder however early intervention is a parent/guardian's best chance of avoiding crisis and effectively intervening before the deterioration of physical and mental health.

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