



Art Marion Manifold

“Eating disorders are about us and our culture not ‘them’ and ‘their eating disorder’ or ‘their obesity’.”

Dr Michael Levine

starving the soul - filling the hole

by Janine Browne

I thought depression was the darkest place on earth, until I heard a young woman speak at a fitness convention about her experience of elite sport and how it contributed to her coming close to losing her life to anorexia nervosa.

I also observed eating disorders becoming more apparent among athletes I worked with; colleagues; young people; and I've seen its prevalence among the exercise science students I teach.

Then there have been people close to me who I've supported through the grueling and unrelenting battle with an eating disorder.

I imagine it would have to be the darkest, and deadliest, hell hole of all emotional states. It defies comprehension and the brilliant minds of the world's experts. It's powerful, it's deadly, it's shrouded in shame and stigma; it's becoming more common and it's grossly misunderstood.

Whilst eating disorders (anorexia, bulimia and binge-eating) manifest into an obsession with weight and food, they are essentially not about food. They are complex mental health issues that are influenced by what's happening in peoples' lives, how they feel about themselves, and our culture.

As an advocate for and educator in fitness and health, I began to question the messages I was giving and their potential damage and adverse affects on people's health and lives. In particular, the well meaning focus on weight loss which I've observed has a very real and disturbing potential of driving people to go to dangerous lengths to achieve weight loss, and in doing so, often placing both their physical and mental health at great risk.

I felt I had a personal responsibility to gain a deeper understanding of eating attitudes and behaviours relating to food, and the complex issues that drive them. In this process, I came to realise how insulting the well meaning food focused solutions were for overcoming weight problems.

It wasn't as simple as 'eat more' (for those with anorexia) or 'eat less and move more' (for people who were overweight), it was far more complex than this.

As I began to understand the many influencing factors that precipitate and contribute to eating problems, I also discovered that it wasn't beyond my ability to do something.

I could play a role in helping people in this area; in contributing to prevention by not conforming to toxic cultural trends; and be an advocate for change in the way we promote health.

I share with you now, what I learnt about eating disorders and what I discovered I could do personally to make a difference.

A p p l a u d i n g t h i n n e s s

Working in the fitness industry, the most obvious influencing factor was the over applauding of thinness. As Kathryn Zerbe points out in her book, 'The Body Betrayed', this can lead to people defining their sense of self and worth by their body weight and shape alone. In the din of the applause and in an endeavor to hold on to the sense of worth gained from losing weight, people may resort to unhealthy and disordered eating and exercise habits.

W h a t c o u l d I d o ?

Stop applauding thinness and engaging in 'fat', 'diet', 'good food/bad food' and body dissatisfaction talk, in the presence of my clients and students, my friends, and particularly my children.

Move towards the practice of making conscious choices about what I eat to maintain my health and energy levels and a body weight that is not determined by externally imposed ideals, but that is achievable and healthy for me.

M a s s m e d i a

Mass media and digital technology further add to the drive for slimness and 'perfection'. Manipulated and enhanced images produce 'perfect' specimens which can engage us in questioning and even ultimately rejecting our own body and self image. When we fall way short of matching the stereotypical images, we can become dissatisfied with what we look like and who we are.

Modeling agent and fashion designer, Stuart Anderson made this statement about the prevalence of eating disorders among models. He posed the question:

"How do we expect the average member of the public to compete with images in magazines when the models themselves can't?"

In addition there is the media pressure for girls to become women, sexual beings. By exploiting the female body in this way, young girls can get caught in the struggle to retain their feminine innocence within an increasingly sexual world. Initial starvation is a way of remaining 'girl-like'; it inhibits breast development and that of womanly curves; and menstruation.

The affects of starvation, however, not only alter their bodies, but also their minds. Their world becomes increasingly distorted, as does their view of them selves and obsession with food, weight and appearance. It can be further driven by the fear of the sexual pressures and expectations that come with being a woman. Music video clips are just one example of the exploitation of sexuality and the female body.

What could I do?

Limit my exposure (and my children's) to mass media (magazines, print media, TV). Become a critical consumer of media. Analyzing, challenging and rejecting the messages and images that we're constantly receiving and again, encourage my children to do the same. Seek positive role models for their personal qualities and contribution to the world, not their appearance, body shape and size.

Adolescent transition

Another factor is the struggle young people may experience during the transition from childhood into the complex adolescent world. An eating disorder can be an attempt to simplify and narrow that overwhelming environment and control the strong emotions that go with it. Rather than 'sitting' with negative emotions they may seek refuge in addictive restrictive or bingeing behavior.

What could I do?

Be sensitive and empathetic to young people and my own children during this time. Ensure the conversations and education relating to puberty emphasize the 'normal-ness' of these body changes and of viewing these changes in a positive way.

Teach my children valuable life and coping skills; encourage them to build mental strength and resilience by challenging their fears; and emphasizing the importance of being able to self protect from the negative influences in their lives.

Abuse

Abuse, whether it be sexual, physical or emotional, can be another influencing factor (though not always). For those who've experienced the violation of one's body and self, an eating disorder can manifest as a means of exerting control over their body and life.

It can also be an act of punishing and rejecting their body and themselves. Extreme weight gain through over eating can serve as a protective barrier for women who've been raped or abused. The less attractive they are, the less likely they believe they are of being violated or objectified to fulfill male sexual desires.

What could I do?

Unfortunately these acts cannot be undone, but personally and as a community we can accept that this is a very real issue that affects many lives and treat those who have experienced any form of abuse with great empathy and care.

Needs not being met

The pressure, stress and chaos of life itself can play a role in eating behaviours and disorders. Busy lives, complex family relationships and structures, and an increase in time spent in front of computer and TV screens can leave little time for relationship and self nurturing, family meals and warm conversations, and feeling a sense of being connected to one's self and the world around us.

The result? People (including children and young people) can feel emotionally empty. Whilst some may fill that hole with food and head towards the addictive, over eating end of the scale, others may reinforce their lack of worth by denying themselves basic needs. Denying themselves basic needs such as food is essentially a form of self harm.

What could I do?

Keep check on the stress levels in my own life and our family environment. Ensure that everyone's physical and emotional needs are being met and there is adequate time set aside to regularly reassess and do this.

Make time for cuddles and free play, and dinner together, where home cooked meals are served on a table that is decorated with candles and flowers, and where television is replaced by warm conversations. Work towards simplifying my life to create a better lifestyle and a sense of success, rather than conforming to the trend and belief that these are achieved through doing and having more.

Protect my sense of self and that of my children in a culture that continually threatens to undermine and erode it. Make time for activities that facilitate the embracing of and connection with my physical self and the world around me, and that of my children. I achieve this through movement, meditation, an appreciation of nature and the environment, and involvement in the preservation of it.

Genetics

Finally, genetics and personality traits like perfectionism, obsessive and harm avoidant personalities (i.e. overestimate the risk of harm) can also contribute.

Conclusion

My suggestions are not offered as a complete solution to eating disorders. The intention is to provide insight; validate those who are suffering; empower those close to someone with an eating problem to play a role in the care and support of that person; and encourage everyone in the community to get involved in doing things that play an important role in the prevention of eating related health problems.

It is also intended that the suggestions help reduce the helplessness often experienced by loved ones and carers— provide reassurance that there are many simple, 'doable' things that can make a significant difference to someone's suffering. Things that are often overlooked and underestimated. Things that don't require expert skill or a scientific knowledge of nutrition or brain function in relation to eating disorders.

I will also point out that although the suggestions I have made are in relation to eating disorders, they also play an important role in enhancing family relationships, our relationship with food and our sense of self, our health and quality of life.

If more of us did some or all of these things we would be playing a very valuable role in the prevention of weight related problems and of helping those whose lives are dominated and threatened by this soul destroying condition.

Useful links:

www.eatingdisorders.org.au

www.thebrontefoundation.com.au

www.thebutterflyfoundation.org.au