

(Editor's note: We take great pride in presenting op-ed pieces written by members of the first graduating class of RNs from the Bachelor of Science Nursing program run by Algonquin College and the University of Ottawa - thus the column's name, "First Class Nursing." The columns will explore health and lifestyle opportunities from a fresh perspective. We hope you enjoy them!)

Eating Disorders in Our Children- Do We Know What They Look Like?

By Suzanne Boivin



Although the media is very helpful at providing information most of the time, when it comes to eating disorders, I find television and magazines often mislead consumers as to what people with eating disorders really look like. The media portrays eating disorders at their worst and fails to inform the public of what the average child looks like when battling such a disorder. Children don't have an eating disorder simply when their body mass index falls to 10. We as a society also need to learn to recognize the early signs and symptoms of eating disorders before our kids start looking like spaghetti-thin models or celebrities depicted in magazines or on television.

Not everyone with an eating disorder looks like Mary-Kate Olson. Working at an eating disorders program recently, I was surprised to see that most patients look like my children's friends. Most are thin but not emaciated. Some look like your average teenager. They wear baggy clothes and multiple layers. But who doesn't these days? What they all have in common are what they refer to as symptoms. They all have an irrational fear of certain foods. This is what they would call "bad foods". They stay away from bad foods. They have an extreme fear of gaining weight. They think if they gain one pound, they'll gain fifty. They all hate a certain part of their body. This is referred to as a "distorted body image".

Most patients over-exercise. They look for any excuse to walk down the hall or go to a different floor. Some are caught exercising in the shower or in their rooms. Other symptoms vary among the patients. Some purge their meals if given the chance. Out of the hospital, they abuse laxatives as a way of purging. What these children all share in common is that they are no longer in charge of their actions. Their eating disorder has taken charge of their life. As with most mental health disorders, children with eating disorders often have other mental health issues. They are sometimes overly anxious or depressed, or suffer from obsessive-compulsive behaviours. Others are perfectionists, have high grades and are very rigid in their routines. They usually isolate themselves from their friends.

In today's society, it is sometimes very difficult for parents to recognize if their child has signs or symptoms of an eating disorder. In our very busy and fast-paced lives we seldom sit down and eat meals as a family anymore. Kids have after school activities or jobs that take them away from the supper table. We assume our kids eat their lunches at school but do we really know? In our present battle with the growing obesity problem, we encourage our kids to be more active. Are we being careful with the population that doesn't need the extra encouragement?

All children need some fat as part of their nourishment for proper development. Teenage girls should have a body mass index of 20-25% to be considered healthy. Their menstrual cycle might cease if they do not maintain a certain percentage of body fat. For teenagers without proper nutrition, a bone scan usually reveals weak bones. Luckily, some parents do recognise some early warning signs. They might recognise a child's rigid refusal to eat any "junk foods", a habit of taking small bites and chewing forever, and the constant need to be moving (legs swinging under the table) as a sign that maybe it is time to have their child assessed for an eating disorder. Do all parents know these are signs to be careful of? I hope so!

Pictures of Mary-Kate Olson show her with a body mass index of approximately 10%. Children with an eating disorder can have a body mass index of 20%. It is not so much about body size as it is about eating habits, fears and anxieties, and daily routines. Boys are affected too! Are your children exercising too much? Take the time to talk to your children, find out what they're doing with their lunch. Plan to have meals with the entire family and observe what your child is doing. The quicker children are diagnosed with an eating disorder, the better the health outcome. Therefore, don't wait until your child looks like Mary-Kate Olson to wonder whether they are suffering from an eating disorder or not. It could be a matter of life and death.