

University stress, food options influence eating disorders: experts

Healthy diet can help mediate perfectionist tendencies

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A graduate of Saint Mary's University who suffered from an eating disorder throughout university, says perfectionism played huge role in her disordered eating. "Ann" is remaining anonymous because of the personal nature of her story.

"It was something I could control in a period of my life where I felt I had a lack of control and structure ... I wasted most of my university career writing down every calorie and pound lost and gained."

A psychologist who specializes in eating disorders says many factors can lead to these illnesses among university students. At the top of his list? Perfectionism.

Simon Sherry, an associate professor at Dalhousie University, says "healthy dietary choices are complicated for perfectionists. Rigid dieting, stress, and unrealistic self-expectations may undermine perfectionists' efforts to eat in a balanced, normal manner."

The three most well known forms of eating disorders are anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge eating. The public often misunderstands them.

“University students can struggle with all forms of disordered eating,” says Sherry. “The lifetime prevalence for all eating disorders is around five per cent. Eating disorders may also shift over time. A student may begin suffering from anorexia nervosa and end up, several years later, suffering from binge eating.”

The Canadian Mental Health Association reports that with women in between ages 15-25, one to two per cent have anorexia and three to five per cent have bulimia.

University students are predisposed to eating disorders because of the frequent lifestyle changes they encounter.

“Several factors converge to place university students at an increased risk for disordered eating,” Sherry says. “A competitive, pressurized environment, perfectionistic personality traits, psychological stressors such as exams and breakups, and unrealistic appearance ideals may all play a role in disordered eating among university students.”

Stresses of a new environment

Andrea Miller, a dietitian specializing in disordered eating, flags the constant availability of junk foods as a troublesome temptation for students with disordered eating patterns.

“Food is available during a lot of hours at universities and you can always go down and get ice cream,” Miller says. “Meals may not be available, but snack foods are pretty much 24/7. That potentially influences binge-type behaviours.”

Miller says first-year students deal with stresses such as being away from home for the first time and changes in social activities. For many, binge eating is a way to zone out and deal with these pressures.

Ann can relate to the pressures of university life and the havoc they can wreak on one’s self-image.

“I didn’t know exactly what I wanted to do upon graduation, so that presented a certain amount of anxiety,” she says. “Food and the number on the scale was something I could control. It was a short-term and long-term goal I could have. I guess I overcame my disordered eating when I felt a bigger sense of purpose.”

What can universities do?



(Photo credit: Jennifer Murphy)

According to Ann, she “fell prey to the classic university unhealthy diet and lifestyle, which led to the dreaded ‘freshman 15.’” She says she lurched from extremes in her diet, “I didn’t know how to achieve a balance in this new environment.”

Universities may be breeding grounds for unhealthy food culture. Many of the food options available on campus are unhealthy.

In dining halls, Miller says universities should focus on changing menus, getting rid of deep fryers, and offering local fruits and vegetables of the season to promote healthy options, because disordered eating can be magnified when choices are limited.

She also thinks that cost is a factor for many students on a tight budget. On-campus food suppliers might consider offering healthy foods at a discounted rate to make them more appealing options.

“(On-campus food suppliers) could start discounting fruit or milk if they’re bought with a meal and other stuff like that. There’s lots of opportunity,” Miller says.

- See more at: <http://unews.ca/university-stress-food-options-influence-eating-disorders-experts/#sthash.VLm9G66z.dpuf>

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