

20 Things everyone needs to know about eating disorders

By Anastasia Amour

Both personally and professionally, I've spent much of my life dealing with eating disorders ? starting with my own five-year, near-fatal battle with Anorexia Nervosa and now, dedicating my life to helping women overcome issues with body image, working extensively with eating disorder sufferers.

Throughout all of this, I've noticed that time and time again, there are certain themes that continually arise in the media's portrayal of eating disorders.

Today, I want to lift the lid and start the conversation. So, from the perspective of both a sufferer and a coach, here are 20 things that everyone needs to know about eating disorders to help us all fight them:

They don't discriminate.

They don't care that your sister gets amazing grades or that your best friend is funny and sharp-witted or that your father is the sole provider for the family. They are also not selective based on your race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, etc.

They're not at all tied to your body shape or size because they're mental illnesses.

Not everyone will show the same physical symptoms even if their conditions are incredibly similar. Thin people can have an eating disorder. Overweight people can have an eating disorder.

The jokes hurt.

"If you don't eat something, you'll blow away!" to a thin person or "Whatever you're doing is working for you!" to a larger person isn't funny. It's incredibly insensitive, diminishing and perpetuates stigma and shame.

They're not a choice.

Sadly, this still needs to be said. They're not a diet. They're not a conscious decision. No one wakes up and says, "Hey, I think I'll ruin my life today?"

They feed off of shame and stigma

Sufferers hear your comments and jokes and quips about weight, and they internalize them all. Sufferers feel trapped and conflicted because outsiders tell them that they need to ?just talk to someone about what they're going through?, but then those same outsiders make jokes about weight or the affected person's disease. Sufferers often feel like there's no judgement-free safe space for them to express just how much they're struggling.

They're a mental illness with physical side effects.

They're not defined by a thin body or vomiting, or otherwise ? they're defined by the mental torment, obsession and they're incredibly complex.

They're not just about food or exercise.

Anorexia and bulimia aren't the only disorders

A sufferer's condition can morph between categories and there are behaviours that overlap boundaries. No eating disorder is any less serious than another.

They rarely work alone.

Because ED's thrive on secrecy and isolation, they often work hand in hand with depression, anxiety, and self-harm. Due to this notion, many hold the misconception that ED's are attention-seeking behaviours. They're not. If anything, most ED sufferers want to disappear, rather than be noticed.

A ?full recovery' doesn't mean that an individual will never slip back into a relapse.

Weight restoration is not the "final" piece of a full recovery..

They're not contagious.

When outsiders act as though sufferers are infectious, it only reinforces the sufferer's sense of shame.

Not every sufferer wants to get better.

This is the hardest thing of all. Sometimes, you identify with your disease so strongly that you'd rather die than be parted from it. Sometimes, the struggle is too hard that you may wish for a grim outcome. Sometimes the goal isn't to die, but to diminish to nothing.

Jokes only make things worse, because they're not a situation that requires lightening up.

15. Life can seem torturous.

They make simple tasks like getting out of bed, going to the shops, and having dinner with your family seem like impossible tasks. They drain you completely.

They're not about not caring about your body by starving/overeating.

They're not phases, goals, or temporary decisions.

18. Seeking help isn't as simple as it seems to an outsider.

Eating disorders thrive on secrecy and the mere prospect of sharing the darkest parts of the behaviours and thoughts that you've been engaging in can be absolutely terrifying. Berating a sufferer with, "I don't know why you don't just talk to someone!" doesn't help.

They're life threatening.

[Not every ED sufferer will survive](#)- in fact, only 46% will 'fully' recover. This is a depressing fact that often goes undiscussed because it's nicer to quote encouraging "You can do it!" slogans but the fact is, not everyone will. Some will die without ever seeking treatment. Some will die in recovery.

They're all consuming.

You can't just "put them behind you for the day". They take over your entire life. They control you. The voice of the disease fuses with your own inner-voice and you begin to view your tormenter as an integral part of who you are.

Eating Disorders Awareness Week runs February 1 - 7. For more information, visit nedic.ca.