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Eating Disorder vs. Disordered Eating, What's the difference?

As our child grows up in our society, you will no doubt notice your child having strange eating habits from time to time. From eating butter straight off the stick to refusing pretty much anything you make, to suddenly disliking a certain food. So when do you need to be concerned? It can be confusing. Couple this with a society that prizes a certain body type (which does change throughout time!) and looking perfect at all times, it can be tricky to know when to be concerned with our child's habits versus what is normal behaviors.

Normalized, Intuitive Eating: This is when we eat when we are hungry, and stop when we are full. It includes a variety of foods, and nothing is off limits or restricted. This allows including eating for pleasure from time to time (traveling and trying new foods or cake at a birthday party) and occasionally self-soothing with a favorite food item (such as ice cream after a hard day or pizza after a tough soccer game loss). This includes gentle nutrition recognizing how our body feels after certain foods, honoring cravings, and understanding that a good snack one day might be chips, another day chocolate, and still another time carrots and hummus.

Disordered eating: Anytime we are restricting food intake or have made food categories off limits. This is hard to hear; as much of our culture revolves around fad diets, "wellness challenges", pseudo science and nutrition. Cutting out carbs, sugars, fats, certain fruits, etc without a medical diagnosis and reason is a good example of this. Exercising to burn off what you ate, solely to look a certain way, or to "earn" a food item is how movement can look disordered. If you have a "cheat day" or have labeled food as good or bad. Any type of dieting that ignores your hunger/fullness cues would be considered disordered.

This describes a vast majority of the population in our country. Please do not feel shame or guilt if you land in this category! We get incredible amounts of messaging from the diet (now conveniently named wellness) culture/companies. Take a moment and think, when was the last time I enjoyed my body? When did I last eat without guilt or restriction? These questions are keys to discovering where your disordered thinking that has created the "health rules" that you follow lie.

Our kids follow our examples and hear the conversations we have with others. If we are constantly pointing out someone's appearance, weight loss, "sinful food" or making comments such as "I'm gonna have to workout extra after I eat this" you are reinforcing diet culture in their minds. While your brain *may* be able to stay at this level, their brains are still growing, pruning, and making sense of the world. They do not have the capacity to incorporate disordered thinking or habits in a healthy way.

Eating Disorder: While eating disorders are vast and varied, here are a few symptoms and signs to watch out for:

- Drastic weight loss or gain
- Eating in secret or alone
- Any calorie counting or preoccupation with types of food being eaten (i.e. having to blot of pizza grease before eating even at a party, refusing celebratory foods etc)
- Refusal to eat what is served or provided.
- Only wearing large oversized clothing, or clothing that is inappropriate for the weather (i.e. long hoodies during the summer, full clothing instead of a bathing suit at the pool)
- Isolating or refusing to engage in activities that used to be enjoyable
- Regularly skipping meals
- Frequent dieting
- Weight cycling up and down drastically in short periods of time
- Extreme concern with body image, spending long or frequent amount of time in the mirror, or always using filters on social media
- Long periods of time in the bathroom, or always using the bathroom directly after eating
- Extreme mood swings
- Non specific gastrointestinal complaints
- Period irregularities
- Fatigue, headaches, dizziness, difficulty concentrating
- Feeling cold all the time
- Sleep concerns
- Dental concerns or cuts/ callouses on tops of fingers
- Poor wound healing/ compromised immune system
- Over exercising
- Smells of vomiting or frequent bowel movements
- Stealing, hoarding, or hiding food or finding food wrappers
- Picky eating that gets worse/ fear of vomiting when eating certain foods
- Preoccupation with looking at others on social media
- Poor self esteem, body image, depression, or anxiety

If you are concerned that your child may have an eating disorder, please reach out. Even if it's "not yet" a disorder but is strange behavior, it is important to address and help to establish health routines based on science, sound nutrition, and medical advice; not what they are seeing on Tik Tok or overhear their friends parents talk about. Remember, eating disorders are not limited to girls (boys have them too), and do not always present in the typical fashion.

If you are concerned that you yourself have disordered eating habits and don't want to pass them down to your child, let us know! We can help provide support and guide you to appropriate resources. Let's end the cycle of hating our bodies with our children!

Resources to get you started:

Intuitive Eating by Evelyn Tribole and Elyse Resch
More than A Body by Lexie and Lindsay Kite