How Depression and Eating Disorders are Linked

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Understanding the Connection Between Depression and Eating Disorders

Studies have shown that those who are diagnosed with depression are more likely to suffer with other mental health problems as well, including eating disorders. Eating disorders can come as a result of or can be a cause of depression.

I am currently over two years into recovery from bulimia nervosa, which I struggled with alongside depression. It was one of the darkest periods of my life.

I found that between the two, my depression played a stronger role and would trigger my disordered eating. The low self-esteem and constant sense of worthlessness that were symptoms of my depression would lead to a never-ending and vicious bingeing and purging cycle.

However, every person is different and it is important to mention that there are many different types of eating disorders that are not anorexia or bulimia. Binge eating disorder, EDNOS (eating disorder not otherwise specified), selective eating disorder, orthorexia and others are all eating disorders and should be treated and accepted as any other mental illness.

People suffering with a current mental illness such as depression, bipolar or personality disorders are more likely to develop one of these eating disorders, and vice versa.

When Depression Leads to an Eating Disorder

Studies show that depression may lead to eating disorders. A person diagnosed with depression may have little to no self confidence or self-worth and may turn to dieting, binge eating or focusing and obsessing over food, further affecting their health mentally and physically.

Some also feel like they have no control over their current problems or their depression and control their eating habits to feel like they have a sense of control and stability in their lives.

Comfort eating and uncontrollable eating are common symptoms of binge eating disorder, which those with depression may develop in the attempt to find comfort from their depression. Those with bulimia may do the same for similar or different reasons but will then feel intense amounts of guilt and shame and will force themselves to vomit or engage in intense exercise regimes to compensate.

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When an Eating Disorder Leads to Depression

In contrast, there is also evidence that eating disorders can later result in depression.

Physically, if a person becomes malnourished it can affect their mental stability and can make them feel depressed.

Additionally, a person with an eating disorder may feel like they need to have full control over their eating, and if they break their own personal boundaries in regards to food or there is an increase or decrease in their weight it can spark depression and feelings of anger, hopelessness, self harm and suicidal tendencies.

Those who suffer with depression and eating disorders may also never believe they are good enough and the two conditions can bounce off each other to make the person feel even worse. Those with binge eating disorder are more likely to be overweight or obese, and can become depressed from this and the constant binge eating and loss of control over how much they consume.

Similar Symptoms

Depression and eating disorders share common symptoms, so you may not notice them working alongside each other. Some common symptoms of both depression and an eating disorder are:

- Lack of energy
- Trouble sleeping
- Intense feelings of sadness or hopelessness

- Low self-esteem or confidence
- Avoiding social situations/preferring to be alone for long periods of time
- Loss of appetite or increase in comfort or binge eating
- Self harm; through lack of eating, overeating, self-inflicting pain and others

Seeking Help

It is important to acknowledge these symptoms and if you feel like you may have an eating disorder alongside your depression or vice versa to seek professional help.

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Seeking Help

Treatments such as medication and therapies can help to reduce symptoms and aid you in your recovery. Due to issues such as the need for control or the intense feelings of guilt and self-loathing, some may be reluctant to seek help.

If you are not ready to see a doctor, therapist, counsellor or professional about your diagnosis, you may find comfort in friends, family or loved ones. Friends on social media and online can even support you.

There are also many help and support lines for eating disorders and depression if you need someone to talk to who can help you through this difficult time.

If You’re Concerned for a Loved One

If you suspect or are aware of someone dealing with depression or an eating disorder, there are many useful types of information available for you to approach this situation online or through other sources.

It is vital to approach mental health with care, consideration and patience. You can support your loved one

through their hardships and mental health problems if they are not ready to reach out for help straight away.

The support from someone they care about can help and influence them to eventually seek professional care and treatment and start them on their journey through recovery.

My Story

Referring back to my personal experience, I was incredibly reluctant at first to accept help. I was too ashamed of my constant bingeing and purging cycles and isolated myself, making my symptoms worse.

I also believed that all my problems were just a cause of my depression diagnosis and that there wasn't any other problem that may have been affecting my mood and behavior. I was in denial that I had an eating disorder.

When I eventually accepted there may be other underlying problems and accepted the treatment and help available to me, I understood that the two worked simultaneously, which increased the symptoms.

The more I understood them both the more I was able to help myself, and the constant support I allowed to surround myself with has got me to where I am today; a step further on my road to recovery.