

Obsessive Americans react to powerful diet images

By Eileen Leonard

ALBANY — The power of the multi-billion dollar diet industry combined with the fashion and movie industries has had great influence on some of the cultural factors in America that can prompt many individuals into developing eating disorders. Many Americans have become obsessed with dieting and the desire to look thin.

Nutrition counselor Nan I. Windmueller, M.S., R.D.T., is asking for participation in reassessing what is attractive and what is meaningful, particularly as we focus on Eating Disorders Awareness week next week. "It's what's inside that counts," Windmueller said.

In a lunchtime educational forum sponsored by the New York State Division for Women at the Empire State Plaza, Windmueller presented a 45-minute program entitled "Making Peace With Food." When she asked participants what they had brought with them for lunch, answers included: "half a turkey sandwich with no mayo;" "low-fat turkey, lettuce, for 105 calories;" and another response was "Slim-Fast."

Windmueller said the kind of images we get from these food descriptions are "diet" and "deprivation." "Is that the kind of lunch a powerful man would bring?" she asked. "It's more of a 'feminine' lunch." "There's no variety," Windmueller added, "Where's the sensual pleasure?"

Certain foods conjure up related images, such as 'grits' which can be thought of as 'poverty food.' Foods considered to be 'elegant' are often associated with veal, beef Wellington, lobster and caviar, explained Windmueller. "The more you think about it, the more you discover most foods have some association such as negative, positive, masculine or feminine," She added. "Food, which is meant to nourish the body, has developed into very powerful symbols." Foods can comfort, punish or reward, she said.

There is an emphasis in the media on unnatural thinness, which leads many Americans to diet over and over again. Since deprivation diets are unsuccessful 80 to 90 percent of the time, Windmueller said "You could argue that the diet industry is in business to keep itself in business."

Our society also sends mixed messages when, for example, a popular woman's magazine depicts a photo of Jane Fonda on their cover promoting a weight-loss plan, while it also illustrates that a recipe for marble cake can help a woman to 'win over her man.'

Dieting can erupt into an eating disorder," Windmueller explained. Eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia tend to be focused on the middle to upper class individuals, in which nine out of 10 sufferers are female. Those affected tend to be high achievers and perfectionists.

People suffering from anorexia nervosa are attempting to solve emotional problems that may involve concern over the family, abuse or esteem. Approximately five to 10 percent of anorexics will die because of complications due to malnutrition.

This eating disorder often affects adolescent girls, many of whom were always obedient children. As they enter their teens, they can experience a "blurring of the boundary lines between family members," and the girl, therefore tries to rede-

fine her role in the family. While she tries to repress her feelings of anger, the one area in which she can exert her authority to say "no" is in dieting. As she develops a control over her eating patterns, she associates eating with negative feelings. In addition, the anorectic adolescent is actually delaying her adulthood by "dieting away" her body's physical changes.

The anorectic may also engage in compulsive exercising, spend long hours doing school work, and have a distorted body image.

Those who suffer from bulimia will use foods to comfort themselves. The word "bulimia" literally means "ox-like appetite" Windmueller explained. The disorder is characterized by binge eating and purging, and the individual never gets a sense of satisfied fullness and also won't feel any discomfort from over-eating.

Although it may feel like "you can have your cake and eat it too," there certainly are consequences. A number of medical problems can develop as a result of fasting, vomiting and laxation. In some cases, "even when they are psychologically ready to stop throwing up, they are not physiologically able to," Windmueller said.

"In the old days, when a person was clinically depressed, the doctor recommended fasting and exercise," Windmueller said. This actually changes one's brain messages. Anorexics are whirlwinds of activity, in sharp contrast to the starving Ethiopians we sometimes see portrayed in the media as lethargic and tired looking. The difference is that anorexics have changed their brain chemistry which also results in the inability to sleep properly.

Bulimics also experience changes in their brain chemistry. While our body naturally produces a chemical called serotonin, which acts as a tran-

quilizer, sleep inducer and mood elevator, bulimics can trigger the production of serotonin by answering their cravings for sweets or starches. After purging, there usually comes a sense of panic and remorse, in which vomiting is a logical response to their loss of control.

Because of these changes in their brain chemistry, those who suffer from these eating disorders can't think clearly or focus on the true underlying problem. Although college campuses are a prime location for people who suffer from these dangerous, life-threatening disorders, few people ever become involved in campus-offered eating disorders awareness groups. "That's because it's still working for them," Windmueller said. They really have to be suffering to want to change these habits.

Windmueller, who is a member of the board of directors for the Capital Region Association for Eating Disorders (CRAED) believes that early detection and immediate treatment is needed to prevent permanent physical damage from eating disorders. But, this may

be difficult since she also believes that someone should not be referred to a nutrition counselor until they are ready to change.

"If she comes before she's ready, she will grieve for this loss and have nothing to replace it with," Windmueller said.

The treatment provided blends psychological counseling in conjunction with medical and nutritional care to develop more helpful and managing strategies with food. The counselors also emphasize developing healthy attitudes and interpersonal relationships.

Of those treated, it is estimated that one-third can be "cured," one-third will never recover and one-third will recover but have relapses during times of stress.

"There are no 'bad foods'," Windmueller said. "The food you've forbidden yourself becomes very powerful."

"When you're losing weight you don't need to abstain (completely) from anything," Windmueller said. "You must learn how to eat and not how to not eat. Not only is it safer, but you have a better chance of keeping it off."

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