

Eating Disorders In Boys: What Parents Should Know

From Remuda Ranch

It seems that the answer to the following question should be so obvious: Who gets eating disorders? Women and girls, right? Actually ... yes, but... More and more, boys are at risk for these disorders as well. Today, anorexia, bulimia, and especially, binge-eating disorder are on the rise in the male population.

What most parents want to know, regardless of gender, is “Why?” To a large degree, the cultural pressure that has been placed on girls for decades to be perfect in achievement and appearance has now been extended to boys. With females, perfection usually translates to “thin,” whereas with boys, thin is joined by lean, muscular, and possessing a masculine physique, as the key set of issues. This insidious message is far more pervasive than a parent might think.

Take male action figures – a multi-million dollar industry in the US. In essence, action toys are to boys what Barbie is to girls. Studies reveal that over recent decades, these action figures have transformed into completely unrealistic shapes. Either they resemble the physiques of advanced bodybuilders, or they display a body that is not even humanly obtainable, especially in the area of the chest and shoulders. Only through extreme steroid abuse could any “real” person even come vaguely close to replicating these distorted figures. Yet, just as some little girls want to grow up and look like Barbie, some little boys want to become big and strong, just like the toys they play with everyday.

Anorexia is diagnosed in boys as young as eight, with an average age of onset between 12 and 14. Often the eating disorder is driven by an obsession with fitness. Either the boy is involved in sports, and sees weight loss as beneficial to performance, or he is not engaged in sports, but wants to be, and views weight loss as the key. Either way, he eats less and less, while increasing his level of daily exercise. Initially, this behavior often appears positive to parents – their son is taking care of his body, getting in shape. The problem is that anorexia is an addictive behavior. As difficult as it is for a parent to imagine, starvation can become an addiction—one that is extremely hard to break.

Body image and appearance are not the only motivating factors for boys with anorexia. As with their female counterparts, extreme weight loss in boys can be a way to exert control in a chaotic world, shift the focus of the family, or serve as a mask for their troubled emotional state.

Interestingly, boys are highly influenced by health-related concerns. Whereas a girl may engage in an eating disorder because her mother is overweight and she does not want to follow in her footsteps, a boy is more likely to do so because his father is ill. Say a father is obese and has diabetes. The fact that the father is fat doesn’t necessarily trouble the boy; but the fact that he is sick does. The boy may say to himself, “that will never happen to me,” then embark on a habit of dietary restricting.

Bulimia and binge-eating disorder, or BED, usually manifest in boys when they are well into their teens. With the former, they engage in compensatory behavior such as vomiting or extreme exercise; with the latter, they do not. With both, enormous quantities of food are consumed at one time, usually two to three times a week. This type of inordinate food consumption is in no way related to physiological hunger; instead, it is tied to emotions. Food is used as a distraction, or a method to cope with unpleasant emotions such as anxiety, depression, loneliness, or anger. Boys, in effect, find solace or comfort in food.

So ... what is a parent to do? Perhaps the most important thing to do is simply observe your son. As a boy ages, he should grow. Weight gain, along with increased height, are natural and normal. If he suddenly becomes overly finicky about what he will or won't eat and starts losing weight, you should be concerned. This is particularly true if he is simultaneously increasing his activity level and becoming compulsive about the need to exercise. In the case of bulimia or BED, other behavioral changes, especially regarding food, should be noted. And though a standard perception of teenage boys is that they always eat you out of house and home, this is different. If a boy is eating in secret, eating a large amount of food in a seemingly uncontrolled fashion, even stealing food, something is probably amiss. If a boy is involved in these types of behaviors, it's time to take a closer look at how he is doing in school, his grades, his friendships, his mood and general attitude.

In short, it is important for parents to know that eating disorders can occur in sons, as well as daughters. But it is equally important to know that help and healing are available.