Understanding the Link Between ADHD and Eating Disorders

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Building Connections Between Eating Disorders and ADHD

Having one mental health condition is challenging enough, but too often mental health conditions come in groups. You might have depression and anxiety, depression and obsessive-compulsive disorder, or bipolar disorder and posttraumatic stress disorder.

When mental health conditions combine, they have the ability to create even more distress and hardships than any disorder alone, so learning about the connections these conditions have to one another is crucial. By understanding the links, you and your professionals can better understand symptoms and improve treatment.

Researchers are currently looking into the association between eating disorders and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). They want to know how frequently these conditions co-occur and if one causes the other.

What Are Eating Disorders?

Eating disorders are a broad group of mental health conditions. The main two disorders in this category are anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa.

Symptoms which mark anorexia may include:

- A restriction in calorie intake that leads to a significantly low body weight based on age, sex, and physical health.
- A powerful fear of gaining weight, “being fat,” or engaging in serious behaviors that stand in the way of gaining weight.
- A flawed way in one’s perception of their body, a self-worth totally dependent on weight, or an inability to see the danger in low weight.

Bulimia involves binges and compensatory behaviors.

- Binges are:
  - Eating a substantial amount of food in a specific period of time, which is much more than someone would normally eat
  - A lack of control over the eating during this period
- Compensatory behaviors are extreme acts to lose weight including:
  - Vomiting
  - Use of laxatives or diuretics
  - Fasting for long periods
  - Excessive exercise
- A flawed sense of self, based around image and weight
Although these are the most commonly-known eating disorders, the American Psychiatric Association has begun to recognize another condition called binge-eating disorder (BED). BED has symptoms including:

- Binges like those associated with bulimia
- Eating very quickly
- Eating until uncomfortably full
- Eating when not hungry
- Eating alone because of shame and embarrassment
- Feeling upset, depressed, guilty, or disgusted after eating

The primary difference is the lack of purges or other compensatory behaviors.

**What Is ADHD?**

ADHD, as the name implies, is a condition with many symptoms that impact someone’s ability to pay attention and remain still. The inattentive signs of ADHD may include:

- Failing to pay attention to details and making careless mistakes
- Not listening when spoken to
- Not following instructions
- Having trouble staying organized
- Avoiding activities that require attention
- Losing important items
- Being easily distracted
- Forgetting details

The hyperactivity signs of ADHD may include:

- Trouble sitting still
- Walking around when expected to stay seated
- Feeling driven by a motor to stay on the go
- Talking a lot
- Difficulty waiting their turn
- Interrupting or intruding on others

**Eating Disorders and ADHD**

At first glance, you can look at these conditions and think they have very little in common. After all, ADHD is a diagnosis that affects many children and young adults, since symptoms must be present before the teen years. ADHD influences schoolwork and peer relationships.

Eating disorders are different, though. They are dangerous conditions often begin in the late teen or early adult years and create significant havoc in a person’s life.

People with eating disorders experience an adverse physical toll from these conditions. Many die prematurely due to poor physical health or suicide.

As it turns out, though, there is a connection between people who have ADHD and people who have an eating disorder. The connection goes both ways as:

- People with eating disorders being more likely than others to have ADHD.
- People with ADHD being more likely than others to have eating disorders.

**What Fuels the Connection Between ADHD and Eating Disorders?**
While further research is needed, clinicians suspect that a major reason why eating disorders are more prevalent in ADHD patients is that ADHD causes problems with impulse control. People with ADHD tend to struggle to control their overwhelming impulses to engage in behaviors they know are harmful or wrong. This is particularly true if the ADHD is untreated or not properly controlled.

There is a strong link between poor impulse control and eating disorders. This is true of both binge-type and denial-type eating disorders. Compulsive overeating is even more difficult for an ADHD patient to control, as are behaviors in which individuals binge then purge, or deny themselves food altogether.

One major complicating factor is that ADHD tends to be more difficult to diagnose in girls than in boys, particularly because girls tend towards a more inattentive and less hyperactive form of the condition and the symptoms are not as easy to spot. This puts female ADHD patients at an increased risk for developing a related eating disorder as they enter adolescence and adulthood, as their ADHD may not be diagnosed and will thus not be properly controlled.

Finding the Best Treatment for ADHD and Eating Disorders

The importance of getting an ADHD diagnosis cannot be overstated, especially in situations where there is a comorbid eating disorder. This is especially true if the patient’s eating disorder falls into the binge category, as stimulant medications used to treat ADHD have also shown great promise in curbing impulsive overeating.

Treating both conditions is essential for the patient to be restored to full health. Typically, a combination of therapy and medication will be used to bring both the patient’s ADHD and eating disorder under control. Medications to help control impulsive behaviors and assist in self-regulation provide a crucial foundation for treating the accompanying eating disorder. To that end, psychotherapy and group therapy can both be a great help.

The goal of treatment is to replace unhealthy habits with healthier ones, and that can only take place over an extended period of time, and with proper medical supervision. If you or someone you care about is suffering from an eating disorder which seems to be caused by poor impulse control, and if other ADHD symptoms are present, seek help from your family doctor or a psychiatric professional.