



UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND UNIVERSITY HEALTH CENTER

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Eating Disorders and Body Dissatisfaction

Mental Health Services : (301) 314-8106

In raising awareness about eating disorders on the university campus, it is important that we remember the many students who may not have clinically diagnosable cases of anorexia nervosa or bulimia, but are troubled by their attitudes and behaviors concerning food and weight. Too many young women are obsessed with food and calories, and spend hours a week exercising to burn up calories, feeling dissatisfied with their bodies, and considering themselves unacceptable as they are.

We like to think of eating behaviors on a spectrum, from very sick, life-threatening patterns, to the very healthy intake of food as fuel, eating to give one's body the nutritional needs it requires to function. Everyone in the world has to eat, to keep their bodies going, and we all have to come to terms with some kind of eating pattern, every day of our lives. Along with this need comes the issue of accepting one's self in one's body, and the need to work with our bodies to keep them healthy.

Most university women have issues about eating, body

weight, and fitness, and for some students caught in these stresses, a more serious eating disorder may develop. For others, support, nutritional guidance, and a sense of belonging on campus may give them enough of a boost to direct them toward more healthful patterns, and get them out of the danger zone.

At the University Health Center we treat all people who are concerned about their feelings regarding body image and food intake. For many students in need of intensive work around eating disorders, we have individual and group psychotherapy, as well as, medical follow-up. We also take seriously those students who are spending too much time worrying about their weight, not accepting themselves, and perhaps over-exercising in an effort to change their bodies. Our outreach and prevention efforts are helping raise awareness of disordered eating on the campus, and reaching many students who may have felt they were not "sick" enough to ask for help.

Here are some ways that you can help foster body acceptance, and offset society's injunction that one has to be thin to be acceptable:

- Model a healthy attitude toward yourself, giving your body what it really needs, including moderate exercise, healthful foods and relaxation.
- Practice taking people seriously for what they say, feel, and do; not for how slender, or "well-put-together" they appear.
- Avoid discussions of weight, size, calories, and fat grams.
- Remind yourself that assuming that thinner people are happier and "better" is ridiculous.
- Remember that everyone's body shape is different; we were not made to look the same in any other way, so why should we aim for a "perfect body?"
- Don't let yourself get in the position of laughing at "fat" jokes or put-downs; in the same way we avoid ethnic, racial, or gender slurs, we can avoid making heavier people the brunt of our humor.
- Remind yourself everyday that beauty is from inside--not what is visible. Practice liking and accepting yourself, so that you will be a good role model to others in your community.

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