

I hope...

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Niece exhibiting signs of an eating disorder

QUESTION:

I think my 16-year-old niece is developing an eating disorder and I am not sure what to do.

She has become more withdrawn lately, doesn't eat dinner with her family and has lost some weight. She seems to be very preoccupied with her body and food, and is not doing very well in school right now. She is not anorexic thin but seems very down. What can I do to help her?

Answer:

Let me first say that there are just too many young girls and their families who are struggling with this issue. Some studies suggest that approximately 25 per cent of all adolescent girls are dealing with some form of an eating disorder (also known as disordered eating). Parents and family members are left feeling incredibly anxious, helpless,



frustrated and unsure what to do. It is very confusing. Parents tend to question themselves a lot, for example, "If I put too much emphasis on her eating will it just get worse? If I ignore it will she become too thin and become anorexic?"

I am not sure from your question the exact issues that your niece might be dealing with so I will need to address your question in generalities and assume that her health is

not in immediate jeopardy. I should also say that there are a lot of different ideas about eating disorders and why they manifest in our young girls. Here are a few of my thoughts.

One way to look at the problem is to try to determine what feelings your niece is not able to express directly. The theory behind this idea is that there is some type of self-destructive behavior that is getting played out with the eating disorder. I once saw an adolescent girl (let's call her Kim) in therapy who felt she was somehow "bad" inside.

Kim was a very attractive girl, athletic and smart, but she just couldn't be "perfect" enough in her own mind and was terrified of being judged by others. No one would have imagined this was how she felt because she seemed to have it all together. Her cycle of eating went something like this: she would deprive herself for

many days eating maybe 800-1,000 calories a day. She was also exercising a lot during that time. Many people in her life told her how thin she was and this felt both good and bad for Kim. She had an irrational idea in her mind that if she could just be thin enough, she wouldn't be bad and wouldn't feel so insecure and scared all the time.

Of course she was also preoccupied with food 24/7 and couldn't stop thinking about eating junk food. About once a week she would go to her room and binge on junk food, which would then trigger a cycle of shame deep inside her that no one knew about. The way to recover from her shame was to go back to the 800 calories a day. This was a sort of redemption cycle where she could prove she was not bad anymore because she would lose weight.

Kim and I spent a lot of

time understanding the purpose of this cycle and why she was managing all her feelings and worries in such an isolated way. We looked at her family and began to understand why she was having a hard time talking to them about how she was feeling. It took quite a long time for Kim to begin seeing that she did not have a "food issue" as she first called it, but an emotional issue.

The major shift for her, and ultimately in her family, was to not have to cope with difficult feelings in an internal and isolated way. We worked with her parents to help identify when she needed some soothing from them so that she could get a hug instead of eating three bags of chips.

I think a good place to start with your niece is to see if she will talk about how she is feeling in general, rather than focusing on changing her eating patterns or getting her to

see her body in a realistic way. Letting her know that you are seeing her pain and not just her body will go a long way in letting her know that you are there for her if she wants. Her parents will also need to decide if your niece, or all of them as a family, wants to begin a counselling process to look at any family dynamics that may play a role.

As I said at the beginning of this article, eating disorders are very scary and confusing for everyone.

It is a good time to get some professional help before any significant health issues begin to arise. We are here to help your niece and/or her family when they are ready.

Julia Staub-French, M.A., R.C.C., is director of clinical programs at Family Services of the North Shore. Questions? Write onthecouch@familyservices.bc.ca or call 604-988-5281.

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See more page 18



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