

Weighting on the World to Change: Today's teens battle to overcome eating disorders

by Nikki Bennett

Emily* was eleven years old when she began considering a process of bingeing and purging that would haunt her until age fifteen. "I saw magazine covers and knew I couldn't compare to the thin, blonde beautiful girls," she says, "My brothers were also wrestlers-constantly cutting weight and both my parents were on strict diets. I got the guilt trip every time I ate something against their diet." At age thirteen, Emily turned to bulimia as a way to control her eating habits and punish herself for eating foods outside of healthy standards. "I hated myself for not being able to compare to others, so I guess I felt that I could control my weight," she says. Her brother informed her family of her newfound eating habits and she was immediately put into counseling. At the end of the eighth grade, Emily stopped seeing her counselor but has since gone back to counseling for issues outside of her perception of food and body. She has grown, acquiring a new outlook on self image and strives to love the person she has become. "Punishing yourself for eating is different than being responsible for what you eat," Emily says, "If you don't love yourself, there's really no way to love anyone else."

Junior Scott Imm also knows the pressures young people can face to maintain a certain acceptable weight. "When you enter high school, your social status is defined by the people who you hang out with and you try to fit in with that group," Scott says. Like many young people, Scott began to view himself differently as he progressed from middle school to high school and also perceived his diet differently. "It was a few years ago that I started to be self conscious about my weight," Scott says, "and I started skipping some meals and eating less which left me feeling weak and tired." Now at a healthy weight, Scott blames his past struggles with self image on the way that American culture devalues hard work, promotes immediate success, and glorifies careers in acting and modeling. "Young people idolize celebrities and the way that person eats, acts, and dresses," Scott says.

At Nutrifit Sport Therapy, counselors and nutrition experts work with people of all ages who struggle with overcoming an eating disorder and/or unhealthy eating habits. "There is less fear if we present these topics in an open forum manner, helping to cultivate young people to ask questions and better understand what their bodies need," resident nutritionist at Nutrifit Sport Therapy Page Love says. Love helps teens, and adults, to define "normal" eating, which serves as an obstacle for many people who tend to overeat or undereat. "As stated by Ellyn Satter, normal eating is flexible. It varies in response to your emotions, your schedule, your hunger and your closeness to food," Love says in one of many handouts given to her patients.

Page Love strives to understand the root of unhealthy eating habits and concludes that, "the conditions with food that we are raised with, how are family eats, or ethnic group eats or our friends" define the way we perceive food. "It also has a good bit to do with genetic compulsiveness. We know there are genetic ties to alcoholism, and now researchers are identifying similar genes for compulsive personality types in all eating disorders," Love says.

Society identifies success with achieving an ideal weight, and Love finds many people ignore or suppress hunger in order to attain a false sense of power and control with weight loss. "I am of the belief that knowledge is power to then make an informed decision about your own health," Love says, "There are some people who believe that we shouldn't "put ideas" into young people's heads because it might cultivate the very behaviors we don't want them to participate in, but it is very much like sex or drug education." In addition to Love's tips and advice for young people, the resources provided on this page offer excellent outlets for anyone struggling with body image.

Love's patients learn to listen to his or her body and its physical cues of hunger, fullness, and sense of well-being, as well as taste. "If we are surrounded by family and friends who respect their body," Love says, "only say positive body statements, eat when they are hungry, stop when they are full, eat in regular intervals, and not judge occasional fun or emotional eating, the result is a healthier relationship with food and body."

*name has been changed to protect the identity of the student