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Under the Radar

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"It’s crippling — I want to be normal but my mind won’t let me," says Maria*, a senior who has suffered with anorexia for six years. A victim of both an eating disorder, depression and anxiety, Maria fights a secret battle far beyond the average load of a college student every day of her life.

"I spent a long time denying it and my parents hovered over me a lot when I was home. When I came to school, I was completely unmonitored and no one knew my eating habits, my schedule, or anything. It was as if I could be normal," she says, eyes averted to the floor.

For students battling any form of mental illness, college presents a new set of challenges. Those with social anxiety fear being humiliated, those with depression fear not having enough motivation to complete their studies and those with complex eating disorders fear their symptoms can only get worse without guidance.

Disordered eating can be classified as anything that diverts from normal consumption of food and beverages as well as other altered behavior regarding food. While it is estimated by the National Associations of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (ANAD) that 3.7 percent of people suffer from eating disorders, 22 percent of college-aged women reported that they were “always” on a diet.

While dieting is not necessarily harmful from time to time, altering eating habits can quickly morph into something much more serious if a person happens to be suffering from other mental conditions.
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"Life outside of rehab is confusing"
College is a time for finding yourself while also receiving an education and building a future, but for some students, this can be nearly impossible when there is a good chance they won’t live to see a long and prosperous future.

Anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and other related disorders can form for various reasons. In college, stress, depression, and anxiety are common triggers for those who have been struggling with an eating disorder for many years, or even those who are slowly slipping into one.

“When I first got to school, I couldn’t handle my course load,” says Cassie*, a sophomore. “Everything was new, and so much was expected of me. I relapsed as a way of coping,” she explains.

For Cassie, diagnosed with EDNOS, which stands for “eating disorder not otherwise specified”, learning to cope with school life while simultaneously experiencing life on her own for the first time was a rough experience. Though there are options for treatment around the Ames area, part of the healing process when dealing with mental disorders deals with trust between the patient and the healthcare provider that many people lose when they leave their “safe zones”.

“I was scared that moving to a new place would make it easier for me to stop eating again,” says Jessica, a freshman. “When I was at home, I was recovering but in college my doctors and my parents and all my friends aren’t watching over me, and it’s nerve wracking.”

Jessica’s fears are common among many people suffering from eating disorders. There is always the fear of relapse, just like with addiction. Students have enough to worry about simply leaving home for a new experience without worrying about the aftermath of their mental illnesses.

Mental illness is something that has been getting more attention in recent years, but there is still a large stigma against those suffering from mental illnesses. According to ANAD, anorexia nervosa is the third most common chronic illness among adolescents and young adults, and approximately 25 percent of college age women resort to binging and purging in order to maintain weight.

Symptoms of eating disorders start small — dieting or trying to skim off a few calories. However, due to the stigma against mental illnesses and social expectations, especially for women to maintain slim, beautiful figures, many will deny having a problem even when their symptoms compile into a full blown, obvious problem.

“Sometimes, I really just want to talk to someone who isn’t sick. Not just talking about my disorder in a clinical setting,” says Jessica. She explains that while she realizes she has a problem, the main reason she finds herself relapsing is because of the people she previously surrounded herself with.

“If the only people you talk to are also battling with eating disorders, such as when I was hospitalized, you forget how to associate normal habits to eating. Life outside of rehab is confusing when people stare at you like you’re a part of a freak show.”

This is the sad truth that many people with eating disorders face. While people feel they are aware of their effects, the large stigma surrounding them can result in a deep misunderstanding.

Some common retorts are that eating disorders are a way of garnering attention, or striving for unattainable beauty. While the media does certainly have an effect on self-esteem and body image, all the blame cannot be placed on media interactions. An estimated 50% of people with eating disorders also battle depression, according to ANAD. Depression has been proven to be genetically linked, so it is fair to say that eating disorders are not entirely existent because their ties to scary skinny media.

Just like with any other mental illness, students battling eating disorders have a hard time adjusting to new lives on their own. The changes hit them much harder than others, and with eating disorders often being coping mechanisms for even deeper mental issues, it isn’t surprising that eating disorders run rampant on college campuses. What is important is that those who are suffering know that there are options available to them on campus and around the Ames area.

OPTIONS FOR HELP

Iowa State Counseling Services
Student Services Building
Monday – Friday: 8 A.M. – 5 P.M.
(515) 294-5056

Mary Greenley Hospital
1111 Duff Avenue, Ames, IA 50012
(515) 239-2011

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
(800) 273-8255

TERMINOLOGY

Anorexia Nervosa: an eating disorder that results in extreme limitation of food consumption often coupled with a distorted body image

Bulimia Nervosa: an eating disorder that is defined by binging and then purging either through vomiting or the use of laxatives

Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (EDNOS): An eating disorder that does not meet the criteria for either anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa