

# Secret Struggles ~ Eating Disorders

■ by Amy Stuart, MA, Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor

**D**o you know what your child's relationship with food is like? Do you know her secret struggle with wanting to look perfect? Do you know about his desire to look muscular or athletic? Do you know about her fear of "being fat"? Our relationship with food is complex to say the least and it starts at a very young age. Millions of individuals, men and women, struggle with an eating disorder and many suffer in silence. If you have concerns about your child's relationship with food these are some behaviors and attitudes you might observe if an eating disorder is present:

- Restricting amount or types of food eaten.
- Avoiding family meal times or eating with friends.
- Counting calories or eating only "low-fat" or "healthy" foods.
- Intense or excessive exercise.
- Signs of bingeing, purging, or secretive eating.
- Withdrawal from family or friends.
- Obsession or fear with gaining weight.
- Poor self-esteem or body image.



The good news is that as a parent there are things you can do to help your child in the fight against developing an eating disorder.

- Examine your own beliefs and behaviors regarding food, weight, physical appearance, body image and exercise.
  - Make sure you have moderate eating and exercising habits with a goal to be healthy not thin.
  - Do not constantly talk about dieting or weight.
  - Stay away from classifying certain types of food as "bad".
  - Model a well-balanced diet containing a variety of food and proper portion size.
  - Discuss the messages and pressure from the media and Hollywood to be thin.
- Build self-esteem by complimenting, encouraging, and unconditionally loving your child as well as teaching that one's value is based on more than physical appearance. Girls especially need to feel loved by their fathers.
  - Cultivate open and honest communication with your child. Establish a relationship in which she feels safe to express any struggles, fears, or concerns.

If you are concerned that your child or someone you know may have an eating disorder try to set up a time to talk with him or her and create a loving and non-judgmental environment in which you express your concerns. Allow your child to talk openly and avoid getting into an argument or assigning blame. End the conversation with a reminder of your love for your child and your commitment to fight this battle together. If your fears are confirmed, seek treatment immediately and begin the healing process to wholeness and a right relationship with food. ■

Amy recommends two website resources: [www.nationaleatingdisorders.org](http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org) and [www.feast-ed.org](http://www.feast-ed.org)



*Amy Stuart sees clients in our Orland Park and Plainfield offices*

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