



Why do so many have eating disorders?

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We are living in a nation that has a rising number of people with body-image issues and eating disorders. Ninety-eight percent of us learn to find fault with our bodies, wanting to lose those 5 or 10 pounds.

On any given day, 30 million American women and 18 million men are on diets, and are eight times more likely to develop eating disorders, according to the American Dietetic Association.

Some people, however, have found positive ways to recover from their obsession with dieting. Carol Emery Normandi and Laurelee Roark founded Beyond Hunger, a non-profit organization in Marin dedicated to helping individuals pull away from their obsession with food and weight, after overcoming eating disorders themselves.

"When we went through our recovery process, we found that most of the help out there was focused on controlling your food and ways to get better, but didn't really look at the underlying issue that created the eating disorder," said Normandi. She emphasized that the problem is not in the food itself but rather in the problems that caused it.

Beyond Hunger has a non-diet approach to people with anorexia and eating disorders. The organization focuses on freeing individuals with internal problems rather than teaching them to eat the right portion. Its philosophy is that every individual has three levels of basic fundamental rights: the freedom to have hunger, emotional needs and spiritual needs. However, people tend to give up that spiritual part of their freedom.

"We are taught in this culture that we should eat certain things and we should be hungry at certain times," said Normandi. "And if we have feelings or emotional needs, we are taught to ignore those, and to intellectualize them."

Normandi and Roark wrote a book called "It's Not About Food," which helps individuals to understand the reasons why they eat. The book also introduces techniques that allow readers to transform their relationship with their food, bodies and selves.

Michelle Wolf, a professor of broadcast and electronic communication arts at San Francisco State University who has conducted research on body image, agreed with Normandi that body image is not the only contributor to eating disorders.

"People [who] don't have a good emotional outlet are more likely to do things that are self-abusive, and that's the anorexia and bulimia and over-eating," said Wolfe, who stressed that the solution is to release our emotions rather than to find substitutes for emotional expressions.

Amy Smith, a graduate student at the California Institute of Integral Studies, experienced pain from body image and eating disorders. Her family always complimented her on her thinness, and, because she was a dancer, it was required of her to maintain a certain weight.

As she experienced many relationship losses, Smith stopped eating. One day, her partner hit her and made her look in the mirror at herself. Smith realized that she had not eaten anything at all that day.

"I just started crying and crashed down at the shower," said Smith, who began to question herself. "What am I doing? I don't look good this way. I am healthy. This is not everything I believed about feminism." She started to see a therapist but again hit another bottom in her life due to the stress from graduate school. She became dehydrated and started to throw up until she received support from her friends and sought help from Beyond Hunger.

"It took someone to basically hold my hand every day and say, 'You are so awesome and amazing, don't do this to yourself,' " said Smith, who started her recovery a year ago. "It really took someone mentoring me and loving me enough to walk me through this."

A lot of people think they will never be able to be normal around food. That's not true, Normandi assures. "If you really work to understand why it is you are using food, starvation or the obsession to take care of yourself, then you really can be free from the struggle and obsession with food and weight," she said.

RESOURCES:

National Eating Disorder Association: www.nationaleatingdisorders.org

Beyond Hunger: www.beyondhunger.org