

Eating Patterns as a Reflection of Women's Development

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About the Speaker

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Abstract

Cultural emphasis on thinness as a mark of ideal body image has fostered a widespread preoccupation with food, weight, and eating patterns among women. Extreme forms of this are seen in the apparent increase of anorexia nervosa and bulimia -- serious disturbances in eating patterns. Normal physiological changes of adolescence which result in increased body fat relative to overall weight for girls seem to contribute to the onset of concerns about weight control. Women who diet chronically or who exercise rigid self-control in relation to food face some danger, psychologically and physiologically, for they tend to lose sensitivity to their own basic needs in efforts to meet external criteria of ideal weight. Serious disturbances in eating patterns as well as "normal" preoccupations with food and weight warrant analysis in the framework of women's psychological development, especially in terms of understanding the understudied nature of women's "relational self." Such an analysis could form the basis for developing effective preventive and therapeutic approaches to achieving genuinely healthy self-perceptions of body image and nutritional needs.

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Food, weight, eating patterns, and body image have become intense preoccupations in many women's lives today. As clinicians and teachers these topics are important in our personal lives and relationships as well as in our professional roles. Of special concern is the apparent increase in the number of young women suffering from serious, even life-threatening disturbances of eating patterns that are diagnosed psychiatrically as "eating disorders." The *anorexic* and *bulimic* syndromes are characterized by extreme preoccupation with achieving ideal body weight, attempts at rigid control over food intake, disturbances in maintaining body image, and cycles of extreme dieting or fasting followed by severe bingeing and purging through use of vomiting, laxatives, or compulsive physical activity. The scope of the problem, however, is not limited to these extreme instances (estimated very roughly by surveys to affect ten percent of the current young female adult population). Rather, for this paper, the examination of the severe disorders may be suggestive in enhancing our understanding of the "normal-

abnormal" eating patterns characteristic of many women today.

Let us look briefly at some current national statistics. It has been estimated that 20 million Americans are currently on a "serious diet" for weight reduction. Ten billion dollars a year is spent on the diet industry in America, including books, health spas, diet groups, etc.¹ This is an anomaly in human experience, where hunger and starvation haunt much of the world population. It has been viewed as a function of an affluent society -- overfed, overstimulated by food, physically inactive, nutritionally unbalanced, and stressed. Truly the obsession with dieting is a national problem. More discouraging are the reports which suggest that 90-98 percent of those on "successful" weight-loss diets will regain the lost weight or more when a careful 2-to-5-year followup assessment is made. Frankly, the picture represents a major cultural *denial of reality*.

Looking at the statistics in further detail, we can begin to see the implications for women. Although there are few good epidemiological studies, a Nielson survey in 1978 showed that 56 percent of all American women aged 25-54 were "dieting."² According to current medical definitions (as reflected in life insurance tables) more than 50 percent of American women are considered overweight. Self-report studies indicate that between 50 percent and 75 percent of American women consider themselves to be overweight.² There is some variation by ethnic and age group, and in the degree of concern over reaching ideal body weight. Further, the degree of preoccupation, the attempts at serious dieting, and the disturbances of self-esteem associated with perceived failure to meet ideal body weight varies significantly for individual women. However, if 50-75 percent of American women are living with day-to-day worry about weight control, I believe it must taken as a *norm*. Those of us who are concerned with understanding the psychological development of women in this society must give serious attention to the implications of such a widespread phenomenon.

Adolescence a turning point

It appears that puberty and adolescence are critical times for the developing preoccupation with body weight. The adolescent growth spurt, the normal tendency to gain weight, and the significant increase in body fat relative to overall weight associated with pubertal development in girls are important factors.³ This weight gain and the experience of the body as "getting fatter" seem to initiate the psychological disturbances in body image and the tendency toward attempts at weight reduction in affluent countries where thinness is highly valued. Careful studies in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Sweden suggest an increase in eating disorders among the young adolescent group. The mean age for onset of anorexia is thought to be between 17-19 years. Nylander⁴ did an excellent survey of all adolescents (2,370 Ss) in a Swedish town in 1970. Most girls reported feeling "fat" at some time during this period. Of 14-year-old girls, 26 percent reported feeling fat; by age 18, the proportion was about 50 percent. In contrast, 7 percent of the boys "felt fat" at age 18. For the girls, the