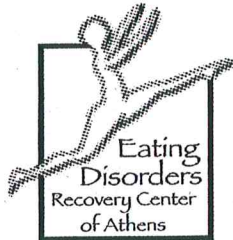


EATING DISORDERS: IS THERE A SILVER LINING?

By Dr. Ann Weitzman-Swain



Are you more concerned about what size you are than who you are?

Have you put your life on hold until you are thin?

Are you existing without living?

Despite years of education and prevention efforts, eating disorders continue to be highly prevalent in our community and within our culture. Greater numbers of young girls are presenting for treatment; a rising number of males are seeking treatment, and most recently there has been a noticeable increase in so called empty nesters, women in their forties and fifties who are coming forward and reporting their suffering for the first time. While greater education and awareness of symptoms is likely to account for some of the increase in eating disorders, much of the increase is an indication that overall, eating disorders are on the rise and are affecting a wide segment of the population. The fact that more is known regarding eating disorders and the treatment of eating disorders is good news - some of the stigma associated with the disorders has lessened. Successful treatments are available. Families can recover from the deep and disorganizing shame that often accompanies an eating disorder. However, treatment is challenging.

Many eating disorder patients are reluctant to make the cognitive, emotional and behavioral changes that are needed to overcome years of emotional and social conditioning. Families are often challenged to provide a quality of understanding, encouragement and support in a way they are not used to providing. And the sad fact remains that the longer an eating disorder remains untreated, the more intractable it becomes and the more difficult it becomes to treat.

The treatment of eating disorders, to be effective, must match the complexity of the disorder. The course and intensity of treatment is determined by many factors including the duration of the illness, the severity of symptoms, the patient's motivation to change, and to what extent the person has any physical complications associated with the disorder. A team approach to treatment is ideal, including an individual and family therapist specializing in eating disorders treatment, a qualified dietician, and a physician. Often a psychiatrist may be consulted for medication if anxiety and depression symptoms are severe enough to warrant drug therapy. Several levels of treatment are also available. Depending on the

above factors, different levels of care are recommended. These treatment options include limited outpatient treatment, intensive outpatient treatment, day treatment, and inpatient or residential treatment. The focus of treatment is on helping the person get his/her symptoms under control, developing new skills for coping with emotions, and exploring the underlying problems in development that keep the disorder alive.

Often people believe that eating disorders are not curable - that a person who develops an eating disorder will always have to struggle. This belief, however, is a myth. People can and do recover completely from eating disorders if they commit to a comprehensive treatment. People rarely recover without getting psychological help. When a person develops an eating disorder, they are saying, without words, "I need help." They may not know why. They may not want help. But they have found a way to let you know that something is terribly wrong and that whatever it is, it needs attention.

Those who recover from an eating disorder will tell you that they are grateful for this special "wake up call" given to them by their own bodies. They will tell you that recovering was the hardest thing that they ever did. They will tell you that they learned so much about themselves and others. They will tell you that they have a peace that they never would have had otherwise.

If you or someone you know may be suffering from an eating disorder, give me a call at 706.552.0450. Together, we will figure out your "wake up call."



Dr. Ann Weitzman-Swain, licensed psychologist, is the Clinic Director of the Eating Disorders Recovery Center of Athens. Dr. Weitzman-Swain has extensive training & experience in the treatment of eating disorders. She is committed to developing awareness about the prevention & early identification of eating disorders. She is located at 1 Huntington Road, Suite 801, Athens.