

[Click here to return to website](#)

JOYFUL MUSINGS

By Joy Birnbach Dunstan, MA, LPC, MAC

Eat to Live or Live to Eat?

We're entering the holiday season, with its emphasis on social gatherings centered around foods and feasts. While this may be a gastronomic delight, it can be devastating to the waistline. Food issues abound in a variety of ways: for some this is an excuse for excess, for others it is a time of denial. For many, food issues are a serious problem all year 'round.

Try to picture someone with an eating disorder, and you're likely to think of an undernourished young woman, probably around college age. But while young women still account for the majority of people with eating disorders, they're not the only ones suffering from this serious, potentially fatal problem.

Recent research finds that the number of men affected is rapidly increasing and that eating disorders in the elderly are so prevalent that the majority of deaths from anorexia nervosa occur in women over age 65.

This surprising fact makes sense when we consider that anorexia is often fueled by a desire to have control when a person is feeling otherwise powerless. For the elderly, refusing food may be the one thing the person still feels able to control—food intake. Refusing food may also be a protest aimed at loved ones, expressing that the person is quite distressed about restrictions on their activities or limited family visits.

For elderly people living alone, limited food intake can also be an esteem-preserving response to not having enough money for groceries. Even more serious, refusing food may be a passive effort to commit suicide arising from hopelessness, despair, and depression.

As we age, taste buds grow less sensitive and appetite decreases. Certain medications blunt taste and sense of smell and a variety of illnesses also reduce appetite. So food restriction may be due to psychological or medical issues, or a combination of both.

At the other extreme, an elderly person living alone may be especially susceptible to feeling isolated and lonely. In truth, any of us at any age, may struggle with these feelings. As a way of coping, food can become a source of comfort or an escape from boredom.

There are three basic eating disorders, and they all include extreme emotions, attitudes, and behaviors surrounding weight and food issues. A person may have one or a combination of them.

Anorexia nervosa is characterized by self-starvation and excessive weight loss. *Bulimia nervosa* is a secretive cycle of binge-eating followed by purging through various methods such as vomiting, laxative abuse, or over-exercising. *Compulsive overeating* is characterized by periods of uncontrolled, impulsive, or continuous eating beyond the point of feeling comfortably full.

While all eating disorders have complex and varied underlying emotional issues, they are often fueled by media that bombards us in so many ways and from so many directions. One study found that after only three minutes looking at a fashion magazine, 70% of women felt depressed, guilty, and shameful.

Media images convey a definition of beauty that is unreasonable and unattainable by most of us, and place an inordinately high value on youth. Consider this: The average American woman is 5'4", weighs 140 lbs, and wears a size 14 dress, while the "ideal" woman—as portrayed by models, Miss America, and screen actresses—is 5'7," weighs 100 lbs, and wears a size 6.

These ideals have gotten progressively smaller over the years. Models of twenty years ago weighed 8% less than the average woman. Today, they weigh 23% less. Marilyn Monroe, gawked upon by many a man as a gorgeous sex symbol, wore a size 14. And if Barbie was a real woman, she'd have to walk on all fours to accommodate her impossible proportions!

So enjoy those holiday feasts, and make a practice of eating healthy all the year through.

[Click here to return to website](#)