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Unhealthy body image prompts self-destructive behaviors

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By SATARA WILLIAMS

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It's been 13 years but Emily Jones can still remember the day her unhealthy body image took on a life of its own.

"I was nine-years-old," the 22-year-old Klein resident said. "My mom put me in front of the mirror in a bathing suit and asked what I saw. I said 'I see a young lady that got way too fat way too fast'."

According to the National Eating Disorder, approximately ten million females and one million males are battling an eating disorder in the United States.

More than 90 percent of those individuals are girls that are as young as 12-years-old to 25-year-old adult women, according to the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill.

Sadly, statistics are showing that the younger audience is engaging in unhealthy behaviors due to a negative self-image.

"When I first started working with adolescents anybody who was self-injuring really wanted to keep it a secret," Deborah Edmunds, a MA, LPC-Supervisor and owner of the H.O.P.E. Psychotherapy of Houston in Cypress, said. "But today kids are younger when they start and they're not so secretive about it. They sometimes wear it as a badge of courage or they show it. It's a sign that they're needing help."

In addition to low self-esteem, a teen's distorted body image can lead to dire ramifications such as eating disorders, self-mutilation and severe depression.

"When I looked in the mirror, I didn't like what I saw," Jones said. "My self-esteem was already low because I was a biracial kid growing up in a white family so I think it stems from there."

Numerous sessions with a psychologist did not help, and by age 12 the pre-teen began to feel that she could never live up to her peers, according to Jones.

Turning to unhealthy measures seemed to be the teen's method of exerting authority.

"I couldn't control anything else in my life," Jones said. "I couldn't control what happened at school, home, my mom or my dad. But I could control my weight and the number on the scale, so I did."

Edmunds said such a response is not out of the ordinary for adolescents during stressful times.

"They may feel like they don't have any other control in their life," she said. "So this is one way that you can control what happens to your body. You can cut it, burn it, scratch it or restrict the amount of food that comes in."

Self-mutilation, or cutting, is a destructive behavior that some teens are engaging in as well.

Edmunds said it's an unhealthy coping strategy that helps to distract the teenagers from their emotional pain.

"Some people depersonalize so seeing the blood drop oftentimes help people come back to reality," she said.

By age 14, Jones began resorting to acts of trickery ,such as placing food in napkins or putting empty dishes in the sink to make it appear that she had eaten, in order to disguise her disorder.

She substituted her meals with weight loss supplements and would oblige when it came time to eat dinner with her family but would vomit before she went to bed, Jones said.

Her boyfriend discovered what she'd been doing and reported it to her family, however, he parents did not believe him .

"When he told my parents they thought he was lying. They said 'no we see her eat every night'," Jones said. "I was eating but I was also throwing up every night."

There are a variety of reasons why someone may have an unhealthy body image; however, many believe that media influence is blame for warping the brains of adolescent girls.

According to the Eating Disorder Foundation, the average woman in the United States is 5'4" and weighs 140 pound in comparison to the average U.S. model who is 5'11" and weighs only 117 pounds.

"Parents have to be willing to explain that what we see in the catalogues, magazines and t.v., especially how women are portrayed, has been airbrushed and modified," Edmunds said. "They need to not allow young people to believe that they have to live up to some standard of perfection that doesn't exist."

Oct. 17, 2005 was the turning point for Jones as the then 17-year-old gave up her unhealthy behaviors.

Her journey, of accepting her own physical appearance, is not one without trials as it is a mental ongoing process, she said.

"I can't really give advice about body image because I'm still struggling myself, but I do understand how important it is to be healthy," Jones said. "It's something you have to work daily at to overcome."

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