



# Center for Behavioral Health Studies

## Dying to be Thin

By Mona Sumner, Chief Operating Officer, Rimrock Foundation

The incidence of eating disorders continues to rise in our country, which disproportionately affects young women.

### Alarming Statistics

The National Eating Disorder Association reports that of the ten million American women and one million men with eating disorders, forty percent are in the 15-19 year old age bracket.

In a recent Colgate University study, it was found that 42 percent of girls in the first through third grades want to be thinner. **Eighty-one percent of ten year olds reported being afraid of becoming fat.**

### What are Eating Disorders?

Bulimia and Anorexia are the most common of the eating disorders, however, both disorders have considerable variants. Bulimics for example may go through periods of restricting food intake while anorexics may use compulsive exercise as a means of "purging".

**Both disorders have grave consequences for the developing bones and health of young women.** "We are regularly seeing young women in their 20's with the bones of 80 year-olds," reports Mona L. Sumner, Chief Operations Officer of Rimrock Foundation.

Since 1980, Rimrock Foundation has been treating eating disorders in a specialty unit staffed with a team of nurses, case managers, social workers, therapists and a dietician. According to Sumner, "during this time, we have seen an evolution in the types of patients coming in with an eating disorder".

Two patterns of family dysfunction are often present. First there is the **classic enmeshed family system** where expectations are high for the child accompanied by an over-emphasis on achievement, performance, and control. Often we find in this type of family system where there is a mother who is very weight conscious and over-values attractiveness.

The other common pattern is the **disengaged chaotic family system** that is characteristic of addiction based family systems. Here, the common theme is one of the children trying to gain some measure of control in the face of chaos and pain through their eating disorder.

### Society's Emphasis on Thin

As girls enter early teens, at around 14 years of age, they are extremely vulnerable to critical messages and to their own developing bodies. **"We now live in a culture that prizes thinness and where the ideal woman is extremely thin"**, comments Ms. Sumner.

In this type of environment, girls are feeling pressured to fit into fashions that are attractive for only the very thin. Presently, girls entering adolescence have a hard enough time with body image, hormonal changes and working through their developmental identity tasks.

**This kind of pressure from the culture and fashion world often becomes interpreted as a major problem.** Even the slightest suggestion from a valued adult - be it a parent, coach, teacher, etc. to "lose a few pounds" - can become a compulsion to be thin.



**Summary**

**E**ating disorders many times are difficult to treat and require a highly trained and experienced multidisciplinary staff.

In the case of an eating disorder, food is the demon that must be faced daily for survival. It is this issue that makes these disorders

so much more difficult to recover from.

Food itself is not truly the issue underlying the eating disorder. **Often it takes a considerable period of recovery before the eating disorder person gains the insight necessary to eat with comfort.**

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