



Eating Disorders in Later Life

This summer has seen a sudden trend for news articles examining the phenomenon of eating disorders – usually anorexia – in what is commonly called ‘later life’. So what is the truth behind the media reports?

So exactly how common is it to see eating disorders in ‘later life’ and what is that anyway?

Whilst for some people their fight against an eating disorder began when they were younger, it is not unusual to see other sufferers whose problems began later in their lives - at an age when many are balancing jobs and bringing up children with the demands the eating disorder makes on them. As usual it is hard to get a clear idea of just how common it is because many sufferers are never recognised and given treatment.

But we do know it is not that unusual to have an eating disorder when you are over 30 – or even older! One study carried out in 2006 surveyed a group of women aged between 60 and 70 and found about 4% of them had a diagnosable eating disorder.

Are there any differences in what triggers eating disorders in ‘later life’?

What is most likely is that in fact underlying difficulties are very similar to those seen in cases in younger sufferers. “Teenage girls and high-flying 38-year-olds have rather a lot in common,” writes Leslie Thomas “They are driven, ambitious, often rather insecure, with a poor body image. They are also rather competitive. Both age groups undergo huge physical changes that are beyond their control.” [1] Eating disorders represent an attempt to find a strategy to cope with difficult feelings and as we get older, life’s challenges certainly don’t disappear. Gone may be the pressures of studying or exams, but often these are replaced with work and home pressure, situations that challenge the way they see themselves, or the loss triggered by divorce or bereavement. Combine this with the pressure to remain looking young and perfect as you get older and it is not hard to understand why some to succumb to eating disorders.

Many commentators have commented on this pressure mature women feel to remain thin and with celebrity ‘perfect’ bodies as they age. As one reporter commented ‘Today’s middle-aged women are, after all, the first of their generation to have been confronted by unnaturally thin role models throughout their adult life’ ([2] Penny Wark). For many now that time of your life when you finally feel confident, comfortable with yourself and secure in your life simply does not exist.

What challenge does this present to those working with eating disorders?

The obvious challenge is to balance eating disorders services and treatment so that it is approachable for these two quite different age groups. Seeking treatment for an eating disorder is hard enough, but if it means finding yourself the eldest by more than a decade in a group, it is not going to make it any easier. The same challenge presents itself to support charities like ABC and BEAT. It is vital that we never forget either group

of sufferers, and also do not omit those who have suffered with their eating disorder long term, perhaps enduring various spells of unsuccessful treatment or interventions. It is important that there is the right balance of hope and recovery focused treatment but also support to help people cope with the long term implications and impact that an eating disorder can have.

ABC is currently considering and looking into the support they offer for ‘older’ sufferers. Are you someone who falls into this category? We’d love to hear from you and hear more about your experiences. Do you feel neglected or forgotten by treatment services, support groups and/or your GP? What challenges do you face as you seek support and treatment for your eating disorder? Please do get in touch and help us to improve the support we can offer.

[1] ‘The anorexia of middle aged Mums.’ The Telegraph, Friday 10th August 2007

[2] ‘Too old to be skinny.’ The Times, Thursday Aug 9th 2007