



# Eating Disorders in Men and Boys

it took the next couple of months to battle between these two views but on the day I went to receive my GCSE results the teachers and students were all totally shocked by just how different I was.”

*Joe Gisbey*

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“ This year I celebrate 10 years of being totally set free and want to live as an example of what God can do when we entrust our lives to Him. Who knows what great plans God has for your life? What I do know is He calls you to greatness, to a life that will blow your mind, cause the hairs on the back of your neck to stand up on end, give you goose bumps and leave you breathless!” ”

In many ways eating disorders affecting men and boys are the same as in women. There are often similar issues at the root of the disorders - things like bullying, stress, anxiety and worries over school and friends. There are the same health issues and physical dangers, but there is one important difference: boys and men with eating disorders often carry the stigma of suffering what is thought of as a ‘woman’s problem’.

This stress and worry on top of the usual emotional strain of an eating disorder is most likely responsible for the fact that depression, anxiety, feelings of isolation and even suicide attempts are even more common in male sufferers than in females. Many sufferers feel that their suffering from an eating disorder places questions on their sexuality and feel that people will judge them to be ‘less of a man’.

Although eating disorders are still more common in women and girls, the rates in boys and men are increasing. Treatment centres are reporting ever increasing numbers of boys being referred and research studies are finding an increase in the rates of younger boys suffering with eating disorders like

anorexia. Overall studies report that around 10% of known eating disorder sufferers are men. However, the stigma attached to admitting they suffer from an eating disorder is likely to result in many men and boys keeping their problem secret, so the actual number of male sufferers is likely to be much higher.

Meanwhile research in schools and colleges is starting to reveal worryingly high levels of disordered eating behaviour in boys and young men along with many who struggle with obsessive exercise patterns. Nearly half rate exercise as important to their self-esteem and as many as 1/3 report feeling distressed if they cannot exercise as much as they would like. These are not just girls’ problems.

There are some differences in the typical pattern of eating disorders in boys and men. Generally they focus more on an attempt to become very fit, lean and muscular rather than just becoming thin. As the director of one clinic commented, “I don’t think boys are trying to be thin so that they look good in their clothes ... I think they believe that to be very fit means not to have any body fat.”<sup>1</sup>

Often the symptoms and behaviour patterns involved with the eating disorder can be more severe in men and boys, which can result in them becoming physically very ill very quickly. However, finding help and treatment is not easy. In surveys GPs admit that an eating disorder would be one of the last things they would consider when investigating weight loss in a teenage boy.

Many sufferers admit to visiting the GP but never being able to admit what is really going on. Behaviour such as bingeing and purging is very common amongst male sufferers and often they succeed in keeping it secret for many years and never get any help. In one study none of the male sufferers identified had ever sought help. Meanwhile parents of younger boys with eating disorders often report a heartbreaking struggle to get anyone to take their concerns seriously. All of this can make the road to recovery for them much harder. Overall the message for male sufferers is positive. Given the right help and treatment, like their female counterparts, they can hope to find real recovery.

<sup>1</sup>. Dee Dawson ‘I’m a boy anorexic’ BBC Programmes.