

Restoring Order to Adolescent Eating Disorders: Unveiling Causes, Solutions, and Societal Impacts

-- An In-Depth Exploration of Psychological Factors, Media Influence, and Shame Surrounding Eating Disorders

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Abstract: This article delves into the complexities of eating disorders, positioning them as substantial mental health concerns rather than mere manifestations of unhealthy dietary preferences. The research contributes valuable insights into the pivotal role played by media in exerting social pressure and shaping body ideals, shedding light on the phenomena of social comparison and the associated social stigma prevalent among adolescents. The profound isolation resulting from nominalization synergistically impacts adolescent body image and susceptibility to appetite disorders. The article also underscores the escalating global prevalence of eating disorders, with a specific focus on their occurrence among adolescents in Singapore. Employing a methodology encompassing interview groups, individual interviews, and expert guidance from psychologists, the research suggests the exploration of media literacy enhancement and the elimination of societal stigma as potential avenues for recovery among individuals grappling with eating disorders. Drawing upon the narratives of recovered patients, the article advocates for heightened awareness within society, emphasizing the imperative to address and actively ameliorate this frequently overlooked social issue.

Keywords: Media Literacy; Body Image; Eating Disorders; Adolescents; Emotional Eating; Social Comparison; Influencing Factors; Social Media; Psychological Counseling; Social Responsibility; Destigmatization.

1. Introduction

“Nobody is immune to eating disorder” confesses Demi Levato in her recent documentary (Miller, 2021). Food is something that we must eat every day. It should be something that brings people happiness. But for patients with eating disorders, food is the devil in disguise, and they face great suffering and struggle with food every day. NIMH (2022) argues that “Eating Disorder is a serious illness, not a lifestyle choice”. With the progress of the 21st Century, we have the ability to resolve many societal, environmental, and political issues at hand. Of equal if not more importance, mental illness such as eating disorders should be shed upon light as well and resolved in the correct way.

The Global Eating Disorder prevalence increased from 3.4% to 7.8% between 2013 and 2019 (Galmiche et al., 2019). In Singapore alone, 7.4% of females aged 12 to 26 are at risk of developing such illness (ranked third in Asia), and the number of young people seeking relevant help is steadily increasing (Oh, 2020). Therefore, we must find the root cause and effective ways to deal with this problem. This article will provide the definition of eating disorders and their causes. And through the documentary recording of three recovered people with eating disorders, as research cases, possible solutions are put forward.

2. Background

An eating disorder is an illness that manifests itself in extremely unhealthy eating patterns. There are a few types such as Anorexia Nervosa, involving partial or complete abstinence from food; and Bulimia Nervosa, involving cycles of bingeing, and purging of excessive food (Aware, 2022). And

that can be caused by varying factors. Firstly, negligence or overly possessive family background can result in adolescents adopting unhealthy eating habits to relieve stress or express freedom. Secondly, teasing from peers causes body dissatisfaction and distress, resulting in a tendency to neglect health to achieve social recognition (Levine, 2016). Thirdly, the overall presentation of the “thin ideal” and other unrealistic expectations over the media has also made patients adopt dangerous diets of zero carbohydrates and insufficient nutritional values (Aparicio, 2019, p.4177). Because of the seriousness mentioned above and the importance of food in life, even in the 21st century, the Eating disorder is undoubtedly one of the most serious and easily overlooked diseases.

3. Project Proposal

There is no doubt that the internet is the most common mode of communication today. Teenagers are the people who have the most direct contact with the internet, and they are also the main groups that suffer from eating disorders, they are more influenced by their peers online (Neumark et al., 2011, p.1004-1011). In order to explore how to effectively alleviate the problem of eating disorders, I conducted a project study and interviewed three recovered patients with eating disorders. Through the case analysis and investigation of the process, I was inspired and put forward possible solutions, aimed at the influences of the media.

4. Proposed Solution

4.1. Cultivate Media Literacy and Self-confidence

A study by Pew New Research Centre has shown amongst teenagers 13-17 years of age, 45% are online almost constantly and 97% use at least one social media platform (Mayo, 2022). This means that today teenagers are bombarded with opinions on the internet every day whether informative, manipulative, constructive. So it's important to correctly discern the message conveyed by the media, build self-value, positive messages, and stay away from negative effects.

"When my body type is not standard, they compare me to my skinny friends around me. They called me fat shit. I couldn't meet their expectations, so I found extreme ways to stop me from taking in food," says M, a 23-year-old interviewer from Malaysia (Tang, 2022). The standard she speaks of is the unrealistic standard of beauty that the media creates for marketing purposes, such as being overly skinny. For example, the film industry has been known for adhering to a set of unrealistic beauty standards that people revere. When characters such as Sweetu, played by Delnaaz Irani, in 'Kal Ho Na Ho' are humiliated for wearing tight clothes and eating sweets (Dharma Productions, 2019). It reinforces the notion that it's unacceptable to feel comfortable on your body if you are fat. These standards make it difficult for people to accept themselves as they are and lead to a range of mental health problems and physical deformities. To attain love and succeed, one must meet "standards" (Khadija, 2016). Due to this subconsciousness to emulate the "standards" in the media, oppression, both subjective and objective, is formed. Subjectively, is to assimilate into the social groups; objectively, is to become a "perfect" self. Although there has been an "awakening" in filmmaking, we begin to take seriously the problems related to the body on the screen (Sarah, 2021). But it doesn't seem to have improved the problem of eating disorders, and some deep-rooted ideas are hard to change (Vaughan & Gregory, 2003, p.3113-320).

The possible solution is to cultivate media flexibility and self-confidence. All three interviewers from the documentary said that they should build their self-confidence and admit their imperfections. Rejecting negative information and comments is the first step and the main reason for their recovery from eating disorders. This requires not only self-awareness but also parents and even society to cultivate media literacy-critically think about different forms of media, improve the understanding of media use, and analyze the content and intention of media producers (Irving et al., 1998, p.119-131).

Research shows that compared with students without media literacy, college women who have been exposed to 7 minutes of psychological education demonstration (involving media analysis) with negative body image are less likely to make social comparisons and less likely to be negatively influenced by slim model image (Posovac et al., 2001 p. 324-340). Teenagers must objectively analyze the correctness of the information, pay more attention to self-worth, and build self-confidence. Hence, fundamentally shielding the negative influence from the media and effectively minimizing the misleading influences of media.

4.2. Cultivate Media Literacy and Self-confidence

Research has shown that there is stigmatization about eating disorders. Stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination against patients with eating disorders aggravate their eating disorders and mental health and prevent patients from actively seeking treatment (Bracelet et al., 2021). "I haven't told anyone around me I had eating disorders. I'm afraid of being treated like a monster and someone who has mental problems. I don't think they can understand me, even my parents, so it's useless." H, a 17-year-old interviewer from China, was mentioned in the interview by Tang (2022).

Nowadays, when faced with the problem of eating disorders, the public adopts a more accepting attitude, but more passive action. The media has over-publicized and promoted the superficial phenomenon of eating disorders, using extreme cases to portray people with eating disabilities as of only a single persona. Maltby et al. (2005, p.273-278) cited the example of a young girl, Kara, who suffered from anorexia to imitate the physique of Vogue model Kate Moss. In reports like this, the media over-publicizes examples of women who have body paranoia caused by their pursuit of the beauty of celebrities only. This is a myopic representation of people with eating disorders. The media simplify the real and complicated eating disorder into the vanity desire of comparing beauty with thinness. This is a serious misunderstanding and distorted concept for people with eating disorders. The media describe eating disorders as a lifestyle choice, which is untrue as it is a legitimate disorder. So people don't think that eating disorders should be so serious- and it can be voluntary.

The above situation aggravated the patients' self-isolation and psychological problems as they are unwilling to share. In addition to their fear of being humiliated when they confess guilt, they also worry that this kind of behavior may be regarded as an act of gaining sympathy and seeking attention (Kammer, 2022). This misunderstanding further hinders patients' willingness to share with family and friends. This kind of disconnection will hinder the timely treatment of eating disorders and bury more hidden dangers.

In the article "Three Strategies for Changing Attributions about Severe Mental Illness", one of the effective ways to change stigmatized attitudes is to replace the myth of mental illness with accurate concepts (Patrick et al., 2001, p.187-195). We should convey clear information and research results about eating disorders to the public, and not just limit the information to doctors, psychologists, and psychiatrists. We must enable people to realize that eating disorders are not entirely caused by the pursuit of beauty, but by many factors, which is the first step to resolve this problem. The social media platforms should be more authentic and diverse, effectively eliminating the stigmatism of eating disorders.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, restoring the order to Eating Disorder requires the effort of various intuitions in the society- the overarching education and regulations efforts by the government, the appropriate external guidance by media and peers. At the core, the strong internal compass of self to stand firm ahead of the temptations, injustices, and negativities. In the end, just as NIMH (2022) argues, an 'eating disorder is not a lifestyle choice'. It is a choice of every member of society – to care, to believe, and to change.

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