



PANDORA'S AFTEREFFECTS

THE SURGE IN TEEN EATING DISORDERS

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CHAPTER TWO

WHY THE PANDEMIC TRIGGERED EATING DISORDERS

The COVID-19 pandemic brought many changes to everyday life, including face masks, social distancing, and debates over vaccines. The lockdowns, stay-at-home orders, and fear of the unknown caused tremendous amounts of stress, anxiety, and depression for just about everyone. Being a teenager is hard enough in normal times. But the pandemic dealt teenagers, for whom interacting with peers is key to their lives and development, an especially hard mental health blow.

Social Isolation

Early in the pandemic, schools closed their doors to in-person learning. Teenagers were suddenly cut off from seeing their peers and could no longer engage in after-school activities. People were encouraged to stay home and create a small bubble of people they could be with. For teenagers, that bubble typically included their immediate family members—no teachers, no friends, no counselors, no extended family, no teammates. They had to stay home and settle for social interaction via computer or phone screens. For many teenagers, this social isolation and the boredom it caused led to depression, anxiety, and other mental health challenges.

In 2019 an intervention program called Teen Mental Health First Aid was launched in one hundred US high schools with help from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. The goal of the program was to teach high school students how to identify and respond to signs of mental illness in their peers. The COVID-19 pandemic interfered with the program, as students turned to online learning in 2020. However, researchers from Johns Hopkins decided to ask some of the students questions about changes in their lives during the pandemic. Their survey sought to learn whether they were experiencing heightened stress or other problems stemming from those changes. “Well over 50% reported that the pandemic and response has created problems,” says Holly Wilcox, a professor at the Bloomberg School of Public Health and one of the researchers. “A subset reported a ‘great deal’ or ‘moderate’ increase in depression (19% and 17%, respectively). We saw very large numbers report having changes in sleep and eating patterns.”¹¹

Most experts agree that the pandemic created a perfect scenario for the development or worsening of eating disorders among teenagers. David Little, a family physician who studied data surrounding eating disorder-related hospitalizations during the pandemic, found a definite spike. “The pandemic has been so disruptive to everyone’s social interactions and to their own psychology,” he said. “Teens are coming to grips with their vulnerability as humans and they are seeing suffering all around them. And there are, of course, the social aspects, no school, no in-person engagement with friends. That plays itself out in different ways.”¹²

Fourteen-year-old Harriet developed anorexia nervosa during the pandemic. “I felt alone, bored and overwhelmed with school work” during the lockdown, she says. “I used my spare time to pick myself apart negatively.”¹³ Harriet’s mother, Annette, says she would sit for an hour waiting for Harriet to eat. “I would give her a sandwich and she would pick it up, physically shake and then put it down.”¹⁴ Annette adds that even as her daughter’s weight dropped, Harriet would still say she felt fat. By December

A girl makes a video call with Zoom. Early in the pandemic, people were encouraged to stay home, and many young people had to settle for social interaction through a phone or computer screen.



2020, Harriet started to have chest pains and was told she was at risk for a heart attack. Harriet was admitted to a treatment center where she could get help.

Rising Anxiety

For teenagers who were already battling an eating disorder, the pandemic and the shutdowns, isolation, and unknowns that came with it were especially difficult. After all, teenagers living with an eating disorder already deal with fear and panic on a daily—sometimes hourly—basis. The pandemic just piled on more. “We are in sort of an eating disorder crisis,” pediatrician Nicole Hinkley-Hynes said in an October 2021 interview. “With the anxiety they [teenagers] feel about the world around them, they turn to things they can control including their diet and exercise.”¹⁵ In the first ten months of 2021, Hinkley-Hynes had seen a 25 to 30 percent increase in children referred to her hospital’s eating disorder program.

Many statistics show that eating disorders have surged during the pandemic. Since the shutdowns began in early 2020, eating disorder support group memberships have increased, waiting lists for recovery treatment have lengthened, and hospitalizations for eating disorders have risen. More specifically, the National Eating Disorders Helpline experienced a 40 percent increase in calls during the first year of the pandemic. And throughout the pandemic, eating disorders remained the second-deadliest mental illness.

“We are in sort of an eating disorder crisis. With the anxiety they [teenagers] feel about the world around them, they turn to things they can control including their diet and exercise.”¹⁵

—Nicole Hinkley-Hynes, pediatrician

Stress, Disruption, and Relapse

Considering the factors that can contribute to the development of eating disorders, including stress, depression, and anxiety, the increased incidence during the pandemic is not surprising. Researchers and health care professionals agree that several factors associated with the pandemic and the nature of eating disorders laid the groundwork for the rise. “Eating disorders are disorders of isolation that interfere with emotional and social development,” says physician Anne Marie O’Melia. “The circumstances of the pandemic have placed kids at higher risk of developing and maintaining high-risk disordered eating behaviors.”¹⁶

While some of the eating disorder diagnoses that have occurred during the pandemic were new cases, many individuals who had an existing eating disorder experienced a relapse. According to researchers reporting in the *Journal of Eating Disorders*, “Not surprisingly individuals with eating disorders have reported increased social isolation, rumination [obsessive thinking] about eating, feelings of anxiety and depression, and decreased feelings of control and social support during the Covid-19 pandemic.”¹⁷ And for those in the midst of treatment, the pandemic exacerbated their symptoms and made it difficult to continue with treatment.

When Healthy Eating Goes Too Far

During the pandemic, the media reported on ways to stay healthy and avoid catching the virus. In response, many people turned to restrictive or trendy diets in hopes of keeping the virus at bay. One of those trends is known as *clean eating*. Eating *clean* means avoiding processed or refined foods and limiting one's diet to foods such as fruits, vegetables, and legumes.

While this type of diet, in general, is healthy, it becomes another form of disordered eating when it turns into an obsession. "It often starts from a place of good intentions," says psychologist Ramani Durvasula, "with a person maintaining a healthy lifestyle or making changes to a more healthy lifestyle. Over time it becomes a bit more obsessional—with a rigid focus on types of ingredients, types of foods, quantities, and time of day things should be eaten."

Doctors call this newer eating disorder orthorexia. A person with orthorexia avoids foods that are not considered *clean* even though some of these foods are healthful. Someone with orthorexia might be overly concerned about the quality or source of foods they eat, avoid eating foods prepared by others, show signs of malnutrition due to eliminating whole food groups, and spend a lot of time researching foods and obsessing over food labels.

Quoted in Rachel Barclay. "Orthorexia: The New Eating Disorder You've Never Heard Of," Healthline, October 20, 2018. www.healthline.com.

Stress is often a trigger for eating disorders, and the pandemic stressed out just about everyone. But for people with an existing eating disorder, the stress magnified their symptoms—which is not unusual. According to social worker Greta Gleissner, "When individuals get stressed, they often act in impulsive ways because they do not know how to transform the stress into something productive. For people diagnosed with an eating disorder, these impulses from environmental and social stressors can cause individuals to not eat enough food, purge after a meal, or engage in a binge-eating episode."¹⁸

Among the many factors that can explain the rise in eating disorders during the pandemic, experts have focused on a few. One is the disruption of daily activities and the restrictions and lockdowns enforced early in the pandemic. This included restrictions on exercise and grocery shopping and the scarcity of certain foods. While hard on everyone, these were even more distressing for those with strict and inflexible exercise or eating patterns. Many individuals and families felt the need to stockpile food, which, for those with a tendency to binge eat, led to the very real risk of falling into a pattern of bingeing on those foods.

The changes to daily activities also led to a decrease in social supports, including access to treatment. With social distancing in place, face-to-face visits with therapists and other health care providers became impossible. What is more, many health care resources were redirected to address the management of COVID-19.

People stock up on food at an Oregon Costco in 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic caused many people to stockpile food; however, for those with a tendency to binge eat, this increased the risk of bingeing.



SOURCE NOTES

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7. Claire, “Claire’s Story,” Bodywhys, 2022. www.bodywhys.ie.
8. Vanessa, “Reflecting on My Binge Eating Disorder,” SANE Australia, February 12, 2018. www.sane.org.
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12. Quoted in Jamie Reno, “Eating Disorders Among Teens Have Risen During COVID-19: What Parents Can Do,” Healthline, May 16, 2021. www.healthline.com.
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ORGANIZATIONS AND WEBSITES

Eating Disorders Anonymous (EDA)

<https://eatingdisordersanonymous.org>

According to its website, the EDA is a group of people who share their experiences with one another with the goal of helping others recover from eating disorders.

Eating Disorders Coalition (EDC)

www.eatingdisorderscoalition.org

The EDC's goal is to raise awareness about eating disorders as a public health priority. Its website offers facts and other information about eating disorders and ways that individuals can get involved to help the coalition reach its goals.

The Emily Program

www.emilyprogram.com

This foundation provides support for people with eating disorders and raises community awareness of these conditions. The group also makes sure that people with eating disorders and their families receive the support they need.

National Alliance for Eating Disorders

www.allianceforeatingdisorders.com

This group provides referrals, education, and support for all eating disorders. Its goal is to raise awareness, eliminate secrecy and stigma, and promote access to care and support for people who are at risk for or currently experiencing and/or recovering from eating disorders.

National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (ANAD)

<https://anad.org>

Hotline: (888) 375-7767

ANAD provides free peer-support services to anyone who is struggling with an eating disorder. Volunteers who understand eating disorders and what it is like to go through treatment and recovery are ready to help others on their journey. The ANAD hotline is available Monday through Friday.

FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Books

Shari Brady, *It's Not What You're Eating, It's What's Eating You: A Teenager's Guide to Preventing Eating Disorders—and Loving Yourself*. New York: Skyhorse, 2018.

Maria Ganci and Linsey Atkins, *Letting Go of ED: Embracing Me; A Journal of Self-Discovery*. Melbourne, Australia: LM, 2019.

Maria Ganci and Linsey Atkins, *Unpack Your Eating Disorder: The Journey to Recovery for Adolescents in Treatment for Anorexia Nervosa and Atypical Anorexia Nervosa*. Melbourne, Australia: LM, 2019.

Cris E. Haltom et al., *Understanding Teen Eating Disorders*. New York: Routledge, 2018.

Amber Netting, *Intuitive Eating for Teens: The Teenager's Guide to Stop Dieting, Overcome Eating Disorders, Emotional and Binge Eating*. New York: Skyhorse, 2021.

Elyse Resch, *The Intuitive Eating Workbook for Teens: A Non-diet, Body Positive Approach to Building a Healthy Relationship with Food*. Oakland, CA: Instant Help, 2019.

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