

Eating-when words aren't enough

By Ilyse Simon RD CDN

Denise is a successful career woman and mother. She's a lawyer in a prestigious law firm, has two kids both in 'good' colleges, and is happily married. Well, she and Irv don't argue much. They have their fair share of problems, but that's expected after 26 years, right? He buys her jewelry whenever he goes out of town...and his taste is improving so that's good. Denise has a morning routine of matching her jewelry with specific suits for the workday. One morning, upon examining her reflection in the mirror, Denise was horrified to see sagging skin under her arms. She remembers how her grandmother had that same sag, but she was 'old.' And maybe her stomach looks a bit puffy. Denise decides she needs to lose a few pounds to feel better.

Denise did have a struggle with weight back in college, but she thought that everyone gained the freshman fifteen. She remembers her college days of dieting. Back then it wasn't that hard to lose weight. She could fast for days. By now, she knows how to cut fats and carbs, and proceeds to drop five pounds, though it wasn't as easy as it was in college.

Denise still doesn't think she looks any better. She decides that a few more pounds will do the trick. She thinks that what they say about losing weight at her age seems to be true. She sure is having a hard time. She skips breakfast entirely, has a non fat yogurt for lunch, and has a small dinner with Irv, if he gets home at a reasonable hour. These additional few pounds are a real struggle. It's taking much of Denise's concentration and vigilance to lose this weight. She's now counting calories and doesn't add any fat to her foods.

Before too long, Denise, who was really at a normal weight when her diet began, is approaching an unhealthy skinny. She feels moody and agitated. Her cycles aren't normal either, but she thinks that could be menopause. She thinks she still looks fat, well at least that part under her arms and her stomach. If she could keep her weight stable and just firm up her arms and stomach, then maybe she'd look better. So Denise begins a strict exercise schedule.

Her clothes are beginning to sag, and it's funny, Irv hasn't noticed her weight loss. Some of the women at the firm have commented that she looks thin, and that felt good. She's dizzy every now and then and gets these incessant headaches, but she reasons that it is stress from her job. Denise continues to exercise, eat fat free foods, green salads, and the occasional small piece of fish or chicken for dinner. She is now underweight and malnourished.

Denise's diet is turning into an eating disorder. Whether she can see it or not, people around her notice she eats hardly anything. She is spending more time at work or at the gym, and less time out with friends. Above all, Denise is exhausted.

When we think of eating disorders we often think of teens. Yet adults are not immune to the pressures of life that can incubate and develop into an eating disorder. In the last decade there have been an increasing number of women between the ages of 30-60 seeking treatment for eating disorders. The Renfrew Center in Philadelphia, an inpatient treatment facility for eating disorders, found that about 25 percent of their clients are over the age of 35. Michael Strober, PhD, director of the Eating Disorders Program at UCLA says “Roughly 3%-5% of people who develop anorexia nervosa will have its illness in its full form for decades, meaning the symptoms will be present acutely well into adult life. So when you consider that the course of the illness tends to be fairly protracted, it is not at all unusual for people who have anorexia nervosa to be of adult age. In my experience, when the illness actually seems to unfold after the age of 20 it is usually foreshadowed by milder symptoms developing during the teenage years.”

Women in midlife face the same food and weight struggles as adolescents. As Dr Strober alludes, the eating disorder may be ‘sub clinical’ for years and may fully develop only after certain stressful events. Whether it is body dissatisfaction as their aging body changes, body image distortion, or fear of fat, women in midlife seem to have similar core feelings about their changing bodies as do girls going through adolescence. There may be feelings of surprise, loss of control, sadness, and fear.

Women in their midlife years also face with new stressors that come with aging. Renfrew’s research found that adult women with eating disorders were dealing with marital discord, divorce, ‘empty-nest syndrome,’ chronic illness, and career changes. Women may also feel an overwhelming sense of guilt and financial strain when contemplating seeking treatment. As heads of households it may be difficult for women to spend money for their own emotional well being. These mid life issues combined with society’s benchmark of beauty can lead to an obsession with dieting and weight loss.

Similar to the cultural push for adolescents to remain prepubescent, is the pressure for women to age invisibly. Enter ‘Desperate Housewives.’ There is a very strong cultural push to be thin and gorgeous at every age. There is no shortage of beauty products to help women ‘look younger’ with ‘skin firming agents’ and ‘wrinkle erasers’. These factors, combined with the same cultural bias towards thinness that affects youngsters, can result in an eating disorder.

For Denise, it seems that the stress of work, the empty nest, and the dysfunction in her marriage has put her over the edge. It may seem pretty clear to Denise that the way to get control of her life is to lose weight. At any age, our bodies and food can act as the vehicle to express the language of emotion. It seems easier for Denise to restrict her food and control her weight, than confront the sadness, loneliness, or anger she may feel inside.

The problems that Denise sees are the imperfections in her body. She feels fat. Fat and old. If she were to use the language of emotion, she might say she felt sad or angry when Irv doesn’t come home till late. But for now, it seems more manageable to feel fat. She

knows what to do about 'fat.' She can lose weight! But knowing what to do about lonely is overwhelming. Denise needs professional help.

An eating disorder may be more difficult for family members to identify when it affects an adult. And as an adult, there may be less ability for a parent or spouse to intervene. Yet there are ways to acknowledge the problem and lend support.

What can a family member do when an adult is engaging in eating disordered behavior? The best thing to do is listen well. The goal is to listen without trying to change or control the situation. It might not work well if Mom, from her condo in Florida, nags Denise on the phone about eating more. The goal is to reserve judgment or criticism, and open the conversation about the person's eating problem. Family members can speak from their own perspective about what they see and express their concern. Family members can also take an active step by becoming better informed. There are many reputable books and websites devoted to eating disorder awareness.

It is important that family members live life as normally as they can, while setting clear and firm boundaries when interacting with the loved one affected. Above all, encourage the loved one to seek professional treatment. Family members may also choose to seek professional support to help them deal with their own feelings about the problem. At every age, an eating disorder is a life threatening mental illness. As Dietitian Connie Degnan RD says, "Individuals with eating disorders need to decide if they are ready to deal with the emotional issues that cause the eating disorder. Recovery is their choice-it is hard work and it takes time. No one can make them recover-they must want it for themselves." Family members can assure their loved one that they are not alone, they are loved, and they can ask for help.

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Resources:

[Change Your Mind, Change Your Body: Feeling Good About Your Body and Self After 40](#) by Dr. Ann Kearney-Cooke

[Body Wars: Making Peace with Women's Bodies](#) by Margo Maine

[Anorexia Nervosa: A Guide to Recovery](#) by Lindsey Hall and Monika Ostroff

www.somethingfishy.org

www.edap.org

www.edreferral.org