

EATING DISORDERS CAN BE PREVENTED!

by: Michael Levine, Ph.D. and Margo Maine, Ph.D.

WHAT IS EATING DISORDERS PREVENTION?

Prevention is any systematic attempt to change the circumstances that promote, initiate, sustain, or intensify problems like eating disorders.

- ★ Primary prevention refers to programs or efforts that are designed to prevent the occurrence of eating disorders before they begin. Primary prevention is intended to help promote healthy development.
- ★ Secondary prevention (sometimes called “targeted prevention”) refers to programs or efforts that are designed to promote the early identification of an eating disorder—to recognize and treat an eating disorder before it spirals out of control. The earlier an eating disorder is discovered and addressed, the better the chance for recovery.

BASIC PRINCIPLES FOR THE PREVENTION OF EATING DISORDERS

- ① Eating disorders are serious and complex problems. We need to be careful to avoid thinking of them in simplistic terms, like “anorexia is just a plea for attention,” or “bulimia is just an addiction to food.” Eating disorders arise from a variety of physical, emotional, social, and familial issues, all of which need to be addressed for effective prevention and treatment.
- ② Eating disorders are not just a “woman’s problem” or “something for the girls.” Males who are preoccupied with shape and weight can also develop eating disorders as well as dangerous shape control practices like steroid use. In addition, males play an important role in prevention. The objectification and other forms of mistreatment of women by others contribute directly to two underlying features of an eating disorder: obsession with appearance and shame about one’s body.
- ③ Prevention efforts will fail, or worse, inadvertently encourage disordered eating, if they concentrate solely on warning the public about the signs, symptoms, and dangers of eating disorders. Effective prevention programs must also address:
 - Our cultural obsession with slenderness as a physical, psychological, and moral issue.
 - The roles of men and women in our society.
 - The development of people’s self-esteem and self-respect in a variety of areas (school, work, community service, hobbies) that transcend physical appearance.
- ④ Whenever possible, prevention programs for schools, community organizations, etc., should be coordinated with opportunities for participants to speak confidentially with a trained professional with expertise in the field of eating disorders, and, when appropriate, receive referrals to sources of competent, specialized care.