

## Stress can contribute to eating disorders among female students

By NYRANNE MARTIN

VANCOUVER (CUP) -- No student is a stranger to stress. But for female students in particular, stress can manifest itself in unhealthy behaviour such as disordered eating.

According to Kathryn Pedersen, a counsellor at the University of British Columbia's Women Students' Office, disordered eating can be a coping mechanism to deal with stress.

"Food is a natural place for women to look if they feel their world is out of control." She says. "It can be a way to gain control over one aspect of their lives."

"You'll see far more bingeing and purging around periods of high anxiety and stress," such as midterm time, Pedersen adds.

And the student lifestyle doesn't make matters any better, she adds. "A student life compounds the problem, especially for students living in residences."

Those living on campus are often dealing with being away from home for the first time, the pressure to form new relationships, and cafeteria eating. In this situation, existing body image problems and issues of low self-esteem can intensify and lead to disordered eating.

Pedersen explains disordered eating is a blanket term for all forms of unhealthy or destructive eating habits and doesn't necessarily refer to an eating disorder.

Most counsellors and psychologists see disordered eating as occurring on a continuum: from feeling fat once in a while on the one end, to

severe anorexia and bulimia on the other.

Early results from a study being conducted by Georgina Maltby, a master's student in counselling psychology at UBC, show that 90 per cent of the women surveyed report some degree of dissatisfaction with their bodies, placing them in the continuum's early stages.

That dissatisfaction plays itself out in a very concrete way, as 12 per cent of the women surveyed also reported restricting their food intake on a daily basis.

To try to tackle the problem, UBC's Women Students' Office is taking on some new initiatives.

An e-mail listserve called Eating-and-U has been set up to encourage dialogue on the subject of body image.

And come January, a counselling and therapy group will begin meeting where female students can discuss issues around eating and self-image.

The office is also applying for increased funds so it can increase similar services on campus.

"At UBC, there's not a lot of choice for students," says Vikki Baker, a second-year social work student. "One of the most important things if you're struggling with disordered eating is to be monitored by someone, preferably who has experience with disordered eating."

Baker says dealing with disordered eating requires a "multi-disciplinary approach," including individual therapy, nutritional therapy and medical management.



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