

Body Blow

Holly Hurt mistakenly thought she was fat and desperately tried to lose weight as quickly as possible. She ended up suffering from an eating disorder that jeopardized her health.

It began as a simple diet. Holly Hurt wanted to lose a few pounds. Four months later, the once **energetic** teenager weighed just 85 pounds.

"I looked like a skeleton," Holly tells *Choices*. "But when I looked in the mirror, I saw that there still was more fat for me to lose. In my mind, if I was skinnier, I would be prettier, smarter, more popular, and just be a better person all around."

Holly, who lives in Danville, Kentucky, was in the grips of a life-threatening eating disorder, and she was

An obsession with food, body weight, and body image can lead to developing an eating disorder.

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not alone. According to the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA), more than half of teenage girls and nearly one third of teenage boys in the United States try to control their weight by skipping meals, fasting (not eating at all), eating very little, taking diet pills, using **laxatives**, smoking, or vomiting. Eating disorders are not fad diets; they are serious illnesses that, if not treated, can lead to death. Ten percent of people suffering from an eating disorder die from it.

"No one sets off to be unhealthy," says Johanna Kandel, executive director of the Alliance for Eating Disorder Awareness. "They think they are doing something good. They think, 'I'm just going to the gym to work out' or 'I'm going on a diet because I want to be healthy.'"

Going to Extremes

But for certain young people, the quest to lose weight or get fit can become dangerously unhealthy. Some teens spend hours exercising every day, trying to burn calories or bulk up. While struggling with the eating disorder anorexia, Holly took extreme measures to manage her weight loss.

"I woke up every morning at 5:30 and weighed myself on two different scales and recorded the amount," she says. "I kept a food diary and wrote down everything I ate and how many calories I ate. I measured my waist, hips, bust, ankles, and wrists."

A variety of factors can cause teens like Holly to develop an eating disorder. Although dieting is the most common trigger, a traumatic

event—such as parents divorcing, a death in the family, or a breakup with a boyfriend or girlfriend—can also play a role.

Eating disorders are more likely to occur in young people suffering from anxiety or **depression**. They use food to try to cope with their fears and sadness, much like people with substance-abuse problems use alcohol and drugs. High-achieving teens are also at risk.

"I had the personality," Holly says. "I was a perfectionist. I was an overachiever. I wanted to be the best at everything. Losing weight was another thing I could succeed at."

Family Pattern

Holly's DNA was also working against her. Eating disorders run in her family. As was the case with Holly, some kids' genes make them more prone to developing eating disorders.

Eating disorders typically strike in early adolescence. Teens are especially susceptible because their bodies are

Story continues on next page.

SAT/ACT WORDS

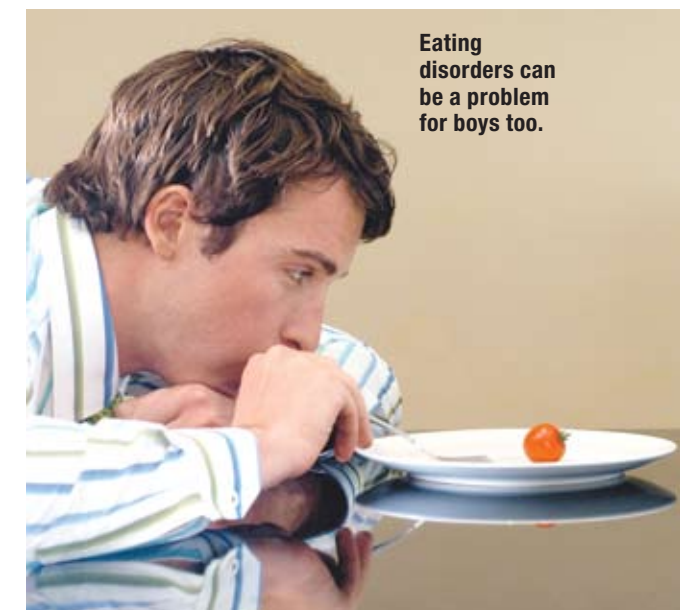
Brittle: fragile

Depression: sadness, gloom, dejection

Energetic: possessing or exhibiting energy, especially in abundance

Laxative: a medicine or an agent for relieving constipation

Unique: being the only one of its kind



Eating disorders can be a problem for boys too.

undergoing major physical changes. Adolescence is also a time when young people become increasingly concerned with their appearance.

Yet for many, the drive to be thin begins even earlier. According to NEDA, nearly half of 9- to 11-year-olds are on diets. Many experts blame the media for our nation's obsession with extreme thinness.

"The media impacts the way we see ourselves and who we want to be," says Emilie Zaslow, author of *Feminism Inc.: Coming of Age in Girl Power Media Culture*. "We still see beauty defined as 'thin.' Young people's constant pressure to be flawless, groomed, thin, and muscular can lead them to feel like

WARNING SIGNS

THE FOLLOWING ARE SIGNS THAT A PERSON MAY HAVE AN EATING DISORDER:

- The person is extremely thin and frail.
- The person constantly weighs himself or herself.
- The person exercises excessively.
- The person skips meals.
- The person always counts calories and grams of fat.
- The person goes to the bathroom immediately after eating.
- The person avoids social activities that involve food.

their bodies are never good enough."

The media's emphasis on extreme thinness is driving many young people to put their lives at risk. "When your body loses an extreme amount of weight, it signals your brain that you are starving," says Dr. Hatim Omar, chief of the Division of Adolescent Medicine at the University of Kentucky. "Your brain then begins to shut down many of your body's functions. As a result, your heart rate slows down, your bones become brittle, you begin to lose your hair and teeth, and all your systems in your body stop functioning normally."

"I Was So Weak"

Holly recalls just how little strength she had left after several months of starving herself. "I was always exhausted," she says. "I was afraid that I might pass out when I was driving. There were times when I was carrying my books in the hallway, and I had to stop and lean against the wall. I was so weak."

By then, Holly knew she was in trouble, and she agreed to be admitted to a hospital. During her six-day stay, she gained eight pounds. But that was just the beginning.

"Recovering from an eating disorder is not as easy as 'just eating,'" says Angela Celio Doyle, a clinical psychologist at the University of Chicago. "By the time an eating disorder has taken hold, it has changed the way a person thinks, and it can be very scary to go back to eating normally again."

Holly entered treatment at the Kentucky Center for Eating & Weight Disorders. There, with the help of a doctor, a

TROUBLING TRIO

HERE ARE THE THREE MOST COMMON EATING DISORDERS:

ANOREXIA:

People suffering from this disorder have an intense fear of gaining weight and a distorted view of their bodies. To lose weight or avoid putting on weight, they diet, fast, and exercise too much. Health problems resulting from anorexia include heart failure, kidney failure, hair loss, and loss of bone density. Left untreated, anorexia can result in death.

BULIMIA: Bulimia involves cycles of eating a lot of food in one sitting—called binge eating—followed by purging. Bulimics rid their bodies of food by making themselves vomit or by taking laxatives. Like anorexics, bulimics may exercise obsessively, but

unlike anorexics, they often maintain an average body weight or may even be overweight. Health problems connected to bulimia include irregular heartbeat, heart failure, ulcers, and tooth decay. Left untreated, bulimia can result in death.

BINGE EATING:

This disorder is marked by episodes of overeating. But unlike bulimics, binge eaters do not purge afterward. They usually eat alone and feel tremendous shame after a binge. Binge eaters range in weight from normal to severely obese. Health problems associated with binge eating include high blood pressure, high cholesterol, heart disease, and type 2 diabetes.

psychologist, and a nutritionist, she addressed the causes and consequences of her eating disorder. She also focused on developing healthy eating habits, which included learning to accept all foods—even ones she considered "bad."

On June 25, 2009, Holly was discharged from the Kentucky Center—she no longer had any symptoms of

When you struggle with an eating disorder, you are dealing with more than just a problem with eating food.

anorexia. One year later, she says her eating disorder is behind her. "Food is fun, food is social, food is necessary for life," Holly says. "Curves on a body are attractive. It's fun to look like a woman and not a 12-year-old boy."

Now 19 and a sophomore in college, Holly has created a Web site dedicated to educating others about eating disorders. Her EDEN (Eating Disorders End Now) Campaign is also aimed at promoting a positive body image.

"Your worth is not determined by your shape or size," Holly says. "It's determined by who you are. Each person is **unique**, and it is that uniqueness that makes you special."

—Karen Fanning

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TEST YOURSELF

Are these statements true or false? Answers are in the Teacher's Edition.

- Eating disorders are a problem for teenage girls but not for teenage boys. True False
- Teens who are high achievers are not among those who are at risk of developing an eating disorder. True False
- One of the signs that a person may have an eating disorder is that he or she constantly exercises. True False
- Experts believe that images shown on TV and the Internet influence teenagers to think that they have to be extremely thin to be beautiful. True False
- Unnecessary dieting is a problem that begins during the teen years; kids in elementary school don't resort to dieting to lose weight. True False

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Holly says that she had the "personality" to develop an eating disorder. What do you think she means? What was it about her personality that contributed to her becoming anorexic?
- The story says that images in the media contribute to the development of eating disorders among young people. Do you agree? Why or why not?