



EATING DISORDERS

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43% of people report the onset of eating disorders between ages 16 and 20

FROM THE MOMENT SOPHIA HELIGMAN, Class of 2018, stepped foot into MHS, she knew her next four years would be filled with high school dances, football games, new friendships and lots and lots of homework.

Unfortunately, homework was not her biggest stress.

Heligman dealt with disordered eating for the majority of her high school experience.

But she was not alone.

According to Missouri Eating Disorder Association (MOEDA) 43 percent of people report the onset of eating disorders between ages 16 and 20.

"I was very very strict about what I would put in my body," Heligman said. "I was super healthy and would never eat anything that I didn't feel comfortable eating because I would feel super guilty."

Although she had always been careful of what she ate, her eating habits did not get out of control until the summer before her senior year.

Heligman said she was shocked when she realized she had an eating disorder because she had always learned about it in school and heard stories about it, but never thought it would actually happen to her.

"I tremendously spiraled downward and I came to the realization that this is not my body anymore and I am not myself," Heligman said. "I was a shell of who I used to be and it was very apparent to my family and friends - no one even wanted to be around me anymore. It seriously takes over your entire life."

Heligman said she struggled with pressure to live up to a certain standard throughout high school, which continuously made her feel inadequate.

"I think the point when I realized that I don't need to prove anything to anyone was the biggest step in

my recovery," Heligman said.

Throughout Heligman's senior year, she hit both highs and lows. Heligman said after being hospitalized, she did not receive proper treatment. Finally, in the summer after senior year, Heligman said she went to a therapist who completely changed her life.

"It was kind of inevitable that I would spiral again down the same eating disorder path," Heligman said. "When it happened, I realized that I really need to dedicate time to myself and getting myself healthy. The biggest thing for me was realizing that the only person I need to please is myself."

Heligman said she will forever cherish the people in her life who reached out to her about her eating disorder.

"At first, it was a very elephant in the room topic which I don't hold against anyone because I know it's a really hard thing to talk about," Heligman said. "But at the same time, the best advice I could give is that even if you even slightly think anyone is going through anything regarding an eating disorder you need to say something just because it can spiral so quickly without you even realizing it's happening."

Heligman said although the physical changes are extremely unhealthy, the mental changes and the way that one's personality can completely be altered was just so devastating to her.

"It is a mental illness - it is not a choice, it is not one day I just decided I want to be skinny and try to lose weight by not eating food," Heligman said. "It is a mental illness that takes over your life and I think the weight loss is not even the worst part."

In regards to social media, Heligman said there are both positives and negatives. While social media was a powerful tool for Heligman to share her story

and inspire others, she also previously struggled with living up to a standard portrayed on social media.

"It was a giant weight off of my shoulders because for all of high school, I was dealing with it, and I was never able to speak up," Heligman said. "You should post whatever you want to post and not feel like there's any judgment happening whatsoever."

Mark Heligman, Sophia's father, said he and his wife began noticing the changes in Sophia's eating habits over a period of months.

"She was eating more healthier foods, and then eating less and less," Mark said. "She was continuing to work out and then working out more often and at higher frequencies."

Mark said they also started seeing Sophia's personality evolve. She had significant mood changes and secluded herself.

"We would call her out and try to have conversations about what was bothering her and what we could do to help," Mark said.

Soon Mark and his wife began researching ways to react to Sophia's behavior and they realized they had to be firm with their daughter.

"We didn't blame her or fault her for what she was going through," Mark said. "We realized it was a disorder that neither she nor we could really cope with on our own."

In spite of their efforts to convince Sophia she needed treatment, Mark said she continued to resist.

Mark said they finally put their foot down and took Sophia to McCallum Place, a treatment facility in St. Louis. They visited the facility with the intent of potentially admitting Sophia; however, after meeting with a counselor, Sophia was adamant she would never stay there.

Regardless, they took her to get a physical at her pediatrician's office, a necessity in order to continue the process at McCallum. Mark said they found out that Sophia had lost a lot more weight than they thought and her pulse was under 40 beats per minute.

Sophia, after seeing the results, finally agreed to get her first real treatment. She was admitted into the hospital for the week.

Mark said it was difficult in the beginning because Sophia resisted the doctor's advice. However, over the course of the week she started opening up to what they told her.

When she got home, Sophia started eating her meals and snacks and putting weight on.

"Within months she was back to health and in better spirits," Mark said.

However after six months of being back home in a normal schedule, Sophia had a recurrence.

Mark said they immediately were ready to take her to McCallum Place or the hospital for treatment if necessary. With college coming closer, Mark said they made it clear to Sophia they would not let her go unless she was healthy.

Mark said this time line allowed Sophia to get through her recurrence on her own with the support of her family, friends and counselor.

Looking back, Mark said one of the hardest parts was watching Sophia destroy her health and become a "prisoner" of her eating disorder.

"It was difficult not being able to help her through it and just feeling helpless," Mark said. "As a parent you watch your children grow up and always take pride in and love being able to take care of their issues and help them. With this eating disorder there was nothing my wife and I could do."

Mark said it's important for parents to provide positive reinforcement for their kids and recognize their tremendous qualities.

"There's so many other characteristics besides looks and image that parents can focus on that can help kids avoid feeling and succumbing to all that pressure," Mark said.

CAUSES

Dr. Robyn Goodman, associate professor for the department of advertising at University of Florida, has researched the influence of media on eating disorder-related behaviors.

While there are a number of contributors to eating disorders, including sexual abuse, perfectionism, body image dissatisfaction, bullying, heredity and cultural pressures, Dr. Goodman said no single one causes an eating disorder.

It is likely though that cultural pressures including both mainstream and social media can influence eating disorders.

"They provide ideals and present those ideals as realistic," Dr. Goodman said. "In general, the inundation of images of perfection from media as a whole can make people feel negative about their body, which in turn can lead to an eating disorder."

Despite these possibilities, Dr. Goodman said it's important to distinguish between correlation and cause.

"If the media caused eating disorders, 95 percent of women would have one because only 5 percent match the idea in the media," Dr. Goodman said.

Tammy Cook, an adolescent dietitian at McCallum Place, said that in many cases, eating disorders follow anxiety, depression or trauma. Eating disorders can be shaped by biology, environment and other aspects that are still studied.

Each eating disorder has its own physical impacts, Cook said. Anorexia nervosa is mainly met with malnutrition, while bulimia nervosa can seriously damage to organs.

Cook is one of four Missouri dietitians who have

obtained certification as eating disorder specialists.

She said a big part of her job is to help those struggle with anorexia nervosa to restore their weight.

The McCallum Place offers three levels of treatment, Cook said, which depend on the severity of each case. Residential treatment includes 24/7 supervision at a center in Kirkwood. Partial hospitalization (PHP) is either a 6-hour day or a 10-hour day of treatment. The final level is Intensive Outpatient treatment which includes therapy and a meal.

While Cook only works with adolescents, McCallum Place takes patients from all age groups, starting from 10 years of age and going up.

Cook said the first step to take as a high schooler who might be struggling with an eating disorder is to talk to their counselor.

Eating disorders are completely treatable and many people do get better, Cook said.

"If you suspect somebody has it, you need to either talk to the person or go to their parents or go to the school counselor and say 'I'm really worried about this person,'" Cook said.

EFFORTS TO HELP

Katie Plasmeier, an adolescent therapist at McCallum Place, said McCallum Place offers a special program for athletes to help them incorporate exercise in their recovery.

She said at McCallum place, typical treatment for adolescents includes three individual therapy sessions, one of which is a family session, five group sessions, two dietitian sessions and supervised meals and two sessions with a psychiatrist every week.

Plasmeier said the center also works with schools to make sure students can still keep up with work and make the transition after discharge smoother.

"At McCallum Place we focus on empowering the patient and separating the patient from their eating disorder," Plasmeier said.

She also said social media has a huge impact on the way many people view their bodies due to the common use of editing apps.

"Now that there are so many filters and apps that alter your look it adds more pressure than ever to look 'perfect' all the time," Plasmeier said.

The use of Instagram is worst of all, Plasmeier said, because of all the celebrities who post edited pictures of themselves and therefore makes it seem as though looks are more important than personality.

"This mindset fuels an eating disorder and causes negative self views," Plasmeier said. "Also the United States cultural importance on dieting affects people's view that the only way to eat is be 100 percent healthy, when the goal should be 'everything is okay in moderation.'"

Another factor that can be detrimental to the development of eating disorders is friends commenting on someone's body or telling them how good they look after working out or losing a little weight.

Plasmeier said skipping lunch to do "homework," complaining about their body, working out more than five times a week or staring at themselves in the mirror are typical warning signs people can watch for when being around their friends or family.

Family and friends is a huge part of recovery for someone who struggles with an eating disorder, Plasmeier said. One of the reasons why McCallum Place offers family sessions to discuss how family can support someone on the road of recovery.

Friends can help by hanging out, checking on their friends and eating with them at lunch.

"At McCallum, we encourage patients to continue to spend time with their friends but want their family to be the main emotional support for their eating disorder since they are active in their treatment and recovery," Plasmeier said.

Melody Miller, a volunteer and board of directors

BY THE NUMBERS:

Eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any mental illness.

At least 30 million people of all ages and genders suffer from an eating disorder in the U.S.

According to National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (ANAD).

If you or someone you know is struggling with an eating disorder call:

(800) 937-2237

National Eating Disorders Association helpline

member for the MOEDA, has been giving presentations at MHS the past two and a half years as part of the organization's Feed the Facts program that began about four years ago.

Miller, who recently visited health classes on Tuesday, Sept. 17, said the program was designed to educate middle and high schoolers about eating disorders, education being a big part of the organization's mission statement.

"We have a mission statement of fighting eating disorders, educating communities and saving lives," Miller said.

As of last year, Miller said the program had reached about 5,000 students. This year they are trying to reach more by expanding to schools located in rural areas. MOEDA is also starting an additional program for elementary schoolers centered around positive body image within the next few weeks.

Miller said it's especially important to educate youth about the topic because 95 percent of people who develop eating disorders are between the ages of 12 and 25.

"If we start in middle schools we're going to capture a lot of those folks who may be starting to fall into the patterns of eating disorders and we can help them develop some other healthier coping mechanisms as opposed to eating disorder behavior," Miller said.

Miller said she hopes the main things students leave the Feed the Facts presentation with are a basic understanding of eating disorders and the knowledge that there is treatment available.

Miller said one of the reasons she is passionate about eating disorder education is to support her daughter Amanda, who struggled with anorexia in college.

"I've seen the struggle that she's had to go through and the struggle that all of her friends and her family have to deal with because of her eating disorder and I really don't want to see any young people or families go through that," Miller said. "It's a heartbreaking illness and is sometimes fatal."

Nine years later Miller said her daughter is doing okay but still hasn't seen a complete recovery. Volunteering is Miller's way of supporting her. Miller said she thinks it helps her daughter to see her helping other people.

MHS was one of the first schools Feed the Facts visited and will most likely continue to visit.

"In a high school this size it's inevitable that there would be people here that suffer from eating disorders and the more of you that know about them the better able you'll be to support them," Miller said.

"It's a heart-breaking illness and is sometimes fatal."

MELODY MILLER