

## **Abuse and Eating Disorders**

Recent studies have shown that there is a high correlation between individuals who have been emotionally, physically, or sexually abused and having an eating disorder. The exact correlation between these two is very difficult to determine as a high proportion of individuals that have been abused never tell anyone and repress the memories and “stuff them” way down. (An adult patient recently told me that term).

Eating disorders, I believe are often a way for individuals who have been abused to “cover” their feelings and deal with their shame, guilt, anger, frustration, in another way. When a child is being abused in any way, they have no control, the perpetrator (usually an adult) has the control. When an individual has an eating disorder, they feel that they have control over what is going in and out of their body, however their perceived feeling of control is really a misconception. The eating disorder is controlling them and not the other way around. Most people that have been abused as young children, believe that the abuse is their fault, usually because the perpetrator of the abuse has told him/her this repeatedly while the abuse was occurring or after the abuse has occurred. They keep it a secret in order to hide their shame and many individuals with eating disorders report that they binge in order to try to deal or cope with the emotions. Food for these individuals becomes their friend and they use it as a source of comfort and solace for hurt emotions/feelings.

I have often heard adult patients say that when they were being abused as children that they would starve themselves in order to try and die and get away from their situation. Other times I have heard that they would not eat or overeat in an attempt to try to make themselves look unattractive and then the abuse would stop. Other individuals will use purging behaviors as a way to deal with their emotions of either previous abuse or current abuse and they purge in order to try and release the negative emotions that they are feeling. For a number of people that have been physically, verbally, or sexually abused, food or an eating disorder is the only control that they feel that they have had in their life and it is difficult to get rid of this behavior as it becomes a pattern. Eating disorders are a very destructive way of coping with stressors, and the goal of therapy is to work through their distorted self-image and find more positive coping mechanisms to deal with issues surrounding their abuse.

An eating disorder is often used to block out feelings of abuse, however it a very negative way of coping and with a therapist that the person trusts, these feelings can be worked through slowly and at a pace that is comfortable for the individual. Dealing with abuse issues in therapy is often a very painful experience for patients and abused individuals have dealt with these feelings mostly in the past by using food as a way to block out these feelings. With proper treatment in a safe environment, these feelings can be worked through and only then will true healing occur and real living can start again!!

Kara T. Tamanini, M.S., LMHC  
Author and Therapist  
Founder of Kids Awareness Series  
[www.KidsAwarenessSeries.com](http://www.KidsAwarenessSeries.com)

Kara T. Tamanini is a licensed therapist that works with children/adolescents with a variety of childhood mental disorders.