



Eating Disorders and Grief

One of the most common ways that people cope with traumatic events in their life is with food-- this is especially true for those who are experiencing a situation dealing with grief and/or loss. Regardless of the type of loss, food is commonly turned to as a way to feel better and cope.

Often times our clients will describe an unexplainable change in appetite and this is common because an increase in appetite or disinterest in food is often our body's natural response to stress. Parents of pre-teens and teenagers often express concerns that their child is overeating, consuming unhealthy foods, or not eating at all. And it's no surprise that we turn to food when we are experiencing painful feelings: it works! Foods that are high in carbohydrates and sugar actually do make us feel better temporarily as a result of increasing our serotonin, which is the brain chemical (hormone) responsible for controlling our mood and behavior. Unfortunately, these initial coping skills may turn into a more serious problem, such as an eating disorder.

Eating disorders are categorized into three different types: anorexia, when the individual severely restricts their food intake and quickly begins losing weight; 2) bulimia, when one binges (eating large amounts of food at one time) and purges (either through vomiting, exercise or laxative use); and binge eating, where one overeats and typically experiences weight gain.

One of the theories about the development of eating disorders is that they are about control. Although there are many reasons why someone may develop an eating disorder, control issues are often a major part of it. When individuals experience a loss or trauma, they often feel very *out* of control. This is especially true for children and adolescents. For example, when a teenager cannot control their environment or even their feelings, they may seek to find control in other areas of their life, such as consumption. Eating disorders may also serve as a distraction for people that are experiencing emotional pain. If someone is thinking about calories all day or exercising constantly, then they can avoid feeling the overwhelming feelings that are the result of their grief and loss. In times of loss, individuals often feel extremely empty inside and overeating may be a way to "fill up", even though it only brings temporary relief. Commonly children who have experienced a loss, especially divorce, feel a sense of self-blame and guilt. This may lead to feeling undeserving of basic needs such as food, which may then lead to restricting.

Appetite changes in individuals who have experienced grief and/or loss is normal. This is a common symptom reported by clients seen at Lee's Place. By addressing the potential development of an eating disorder, we help people recognize that what they may be experiencing is normal and assist them in developing healthy coping skills.

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