

Eating Disorders and Sexual Assault

Often times, those who have experienced sexual assault develop eating disorders as a means of coping after the incident(s). **It is important to note, however, that not everyone who experiences sexual assault develops an eating disorder nor does everyone who has an eating disorder have a history of sexual assault.**

What is an eating disorder?

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, "Eating disorders involve serious disturbances in eating behavior, such as extreme and unhealthy reduction of food intake or severe overeating, as well as feelings of distress or extreme concern about body shape or weight."

How are eating disorders and sexual assault related?

In situations of sexual assault, a survivor may look for areas of her life to control since the incident may have left her feeling relatively powerless. She attempts to regain this power by:

- Controlling how much/what she eats
- Punishing herself for feelings about the assault through eating/not eating or purging
- Surviving on small amounts of food
- Protecting herself by gaining/losing weight in attempt to make her body unattractive
- Denying her physical needs (hunger, rest, etc)

Other Resources:

Wonderlich, Stephen A.; Crosby, Ross D.; Mitchell, James E.; Thompson, Kevin M.; Redlin, Jennifer; Demuth, Gail; Smyth, Joshua; Haseltine, Beth. (2001). Eating Disturbance and Sexual Trauma in Childhood and Adulthood. By: International Journal of Eating Disorders, 30 (4), p401-412, 12p, 4 charts.

Dansky BS (1997). The National Women's Study: relationship of victimization and posttraumatic stress disorder to bulimia nervosa. (eng; includes abstract) By , The International Journal Of Eating Disorders [Int J Eat Disord], 21 (3), pp. 213-28.

Laws, Ami; Golding, Jacqueline M. (1996). Sexual Assault History and Eating Disorder Symptoms among White, Hispanic, and African-American Women and Men. American Journal of Public Health, 86 (4), p579-579, 4p, 2 charts.