

Eating Disorders: They're Not All Extreme

How To Recognize Chronic Dieting and ED-NOS

by Constance Rhodes

"I don't have an eating disorder, I just watch what I eat..." This was the line I repeated anytime someone suggested my obsession with weight and dieting might be a problem. A decade later, I discovered they were right...

How It All Started

Weight was never an issue for me until I put on 15 pounds during my first semester at college. I was so surprised by the unexpected weight gain that I immediately took desperate measures to try and lose the weight quickly. I tried grapefruit diets. I tried skipping meals. I tried drastically limiting my calories. But because I was so freaked out about it, my fear worked against me, and I found myself overeating even more out of sheer frustration. This, of course, only increased my disgust with my body, and I soon found myself trapped in an endless cycle of yo-yo dieting and disordered eating.

After about 3 years of this, I was completely worn out with the ups and downs of my eating and my weight. One day I took a long hard look in the mirror and told myself that if I could just stop bingeing, I would never have to be heavier than I was at that moment. Somehow, my resolve remained strong, and slowly but surely the pounds came off. Little did I know my obsession with food and weight was far from over.

When Dieting Turns Chronic

Once my weight returned to normal, I was so terrified of gaining weight again that I just kept dieting. If I ate what I thought was too much for breakfast, I'd skip lunch. If I ate a piece of pizza for dinner, I would worry all evening, sure that the next day I wouldn't be able to fit into my clothes. As the years went by, I was on constant alert. No detail escaped me - calories, fat grams, how tight my clothes felt, how much I weighed, what size I wore... slowly but surely everything in my life centered on my diet and controlling my weight.

A Private Struggle

No one would have guessed I had issues with food - I had an exciting job in the music business, an attractive husband, and most of all, I had the thin figure most women wish for. But on the inside I was incredibly insecure. I believed that if I was to gain weight, no one would like me anymore. And so I felt I had no choice but to continue obsessing about being thin. Besides, doesn't everyone watch what they eat?

What I didn't know at the time was that my constant (or chronic) dieting was actually a type of eating disorder. Turns out that you don't have to be extreme to be a disordered eater. There is a classification for non-extreme disordered eaters called "ED-NOS," which stands for

Eating Disorders Not Otherwise Specified. These are also referred to sometimes as "sub-clinical" eating disorders.

Some Examples of ED-NOS

*You always obsess about your weight and your clothing size, but you still eat regular meals.

*You binge occasionally, but not more than a few times a month.

*If you feel like you're gaining weight, you immediately 'restrict' or stop eating for a day or so.

*You eat very little but you haven't stopped having periods (for girls) or your weight is not lower than 86% of your ideal body weight.

*You eat regular meals but always exercise to try and burn off all the calories you eat.

As you can see, this classification is very broad. Because of this, it can be easy to overlook a problem that might really be in need of addressing. It's also hard sometimes to find someone who recognizes the private burden you carry. But there is definitely hope.

Breaking Free

I am not a psychologist, so I can't give you any clinically proven methods for addressing this in your own life. What I can do, however, is tell you a few things that worked for me:

1. First, I prayed that God would make me 'willing to be willing' to address this issue in my life. I told Him that I didn't really want to give it up, but asked Him to help me want to. The more I opened up my heart to receive His truth, the more I saw the downsides of my obsession.
2. I prayed that God would give me someone to talk to who would not judge me, or think that I was weird because of my problem. After praying this prayer, I kept my eyes and ears open, and sure enough, God brought someone into my life who became a great friend and counselor to me.
3. I looked around and realized that not everyone held themselves to the same standards of weight that I had lived by for so many years. I saw that they were happy, and healthy, had friends, and seemed perfectly fine. I started reminding myself that if other girls didn't have to be a size 2 to be happy, neither did I.
4. Slowly but surely I started expanding my self-imposed rules about what I could or couldn't eat. I started eating more fruits and veggies, meats besides grilled chicken or fish, and even the occasional dessert. Even though I was mentally preparing myself to gain some

weight, it was cool to see that my body seemed to know how to regulate itself. Even though I was eating better foods, I didn't suddenly blimp out. This helped ease my fears too.

Life Outside the 'Thin' Cage

One of the most important things God revealed to me was that choosing to eat better didn't mean giving up what really made me happy. In fact, it meant just the opposite. Instead of me feeling like the need to be thin controlled my life, I realized that there was more to live for than what size I wore. And so I reclaimed the right to love my body, regardless of what anyone else thought of me.

Today I am no longer living in what I now refer to as the 'thin cage'. I weigh a little more than I did at the height of my chronic dieting phase, but I no longer think about eating and weight all the time. And the best part is that now I have so much more time and energy to do the things I really love, and to discover more about the unique calling that God has on my life. Life is definitely better outside the cage!

Constance Rhodes is the author of the book *Life Inside the 'Thin' Cage: A Personal Look into the Hidden World of the Chronic Dieter*. For more info, or to read a free excerpt, visit her website at www.findingbalance.com. For information on reprinting this article please contact Constance via her website.