

Mental Health Issues & Personality Traits Associated with Eating Disorders

Eating disorders affect millions of men and women of all ages, races, sexual orientations, geographic locations, socioeconomic levels, and religions. These illnesses do not discriminate! Eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of ALL mental health diagnoses, and numerous physical complications can develop from an eating disorder.

Many people affected by eating disorders also struggle with other mental health issues; this is known as “comorbidity.” Mental health issues that are often experienced by people with eating disorders include, but are not limited to:

- Depression: decreased interest in activities that were once pleasurable, changes in sleep patterns and weight, irritable or moody, frequent crying
- Anxiety: generalized worry, obsessive-compulsive tendencies, easily stressed, catastrophize seemingly minor issues, fear of social situations
- Substance use: frequent intake of alcohol, nicotine, and/or illegal drugs (these are often used to numb the feelings of anxiety, depression)
- Post-traumatic stress disorder: intense fear, helplessness, or horror after experiencing or witnessing an extreme traumatic stressor; ongoing re-experiencing of traumatic stressor (common for survivors of abuse)
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD): impulsivity, inattentiveness, and/or hyperactivity that significantly impairs ability to effectively participate in school, home, work, etc. (symptoms must have been present before age 7 to be diagnosed)

Because eating disorders affect people from all walks of life, there is no one “type” of person who is more or less likely to have an eating disorder. However, there are some common personality traits that are consistently displayed by people with eating disorders, so it is useful to know what these traits look like, as this might help you understand how a person’s behaviors may be closely linked with the eating disorder. It is important to remember that personality traits are rooted in genetics, just like eating disorders, and that people don’t necessarily “choose” to develop these traits.

Common personality traits of people with eating disorders include, but are not limited to:

- Perfectionism: intense focus on doing things perfectly and maintaining a perfect image; constantly feeling as though your efforts are never good enough
- People-Pleaser: concerned with meeting others’ needs before meeting one’s own needs; difficulty with saying “No” to people’s requests for fear that they will be upset or disappointed in you
- Stubborn or Strong-Willed: insist that things be done your way
- Impulsive: less likely to “think things through;” more likely to make rash decisions; may manifest in risk-taking behaviors, stealing, and/or shoplifting
- Dichotomous Thinking: classify things into polar opposites; “black-and-white thinking;” all-or-nothing (e.g., foods are either “good” or “bad”)
- Hypersensitive: extremely sensitive to how others treat you and react to you; easily flustered when you think others might be dissatisfied with you