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Eating Disorders Among Women of Color: Current Issues

Abstract

Over the past few years, there has been increasing evidence that eating disorders are occurring in racial minorities and ethnic minorities in increasing numbers. This presentation will look at the evidence supporting this trend. We will also look at how eating disorders differ in different racial groups and ethnic minorities. We will explore the issue of acculturation and ethnic and racial identity.

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For many years it has been felt that being a member of a racial or ethnic minority "protected" women from developing eating disorders or disordered eating. Unfortunately, over the past few years, there has been increasing evidence that eating disorders are occurring in racial minorities and ethnic minorities in increasing numbers. Exact statistics of the prevalence of eating disorders among minority and ethnic minority women are unavailable mainly because little research has been done in this area until recently. We will look at what evidence that is available.

In addition, the presentation will provide a more general overview of eating disorders and their typical presentations. Anorexia nervosa, bulimia and binge eating disorders are common diagnoses on college campuses. To this end, Counseling and Psychological Services has developed an Eating Disorders Treatment team, which focuses on the diagnosis and treatment of eating disorders. The presenters, as members of this team can discuss the care and treatment of such clients. The presentation will also focus on body image, societal expectations and the influence of the media. Discussion will be devoted to the connection between racial identity development and the development of eating disorders. Moreover, specific discussion will be devoted to the presentation of eating disorders in specific racial! cultural groups. Whereas early research on eating disorders focused more on the presentation and development of eating disorders in white females, more recent research has looked toward the presentations and development of such disorders in minority and underrepresented communities. Such work has told an increasingly sad story of how minority women are exhibiting symptoms of eating disorders at rates as high as rates for their white counterparts. This issue coupled with the low rate of minority clients seeking treatment suggests that there is a potentially large segment of the population suffering in silence. These unheard, underrepresented women have been influenced by the media's and societies' suggestion that thinner is better. Women of color are being more and more influenced by this concept of beauty. Moreover, they are suffering because treatment is not socially acceptable for them.

The goal of this presentation will be to erase the notion that only affluent white women are exhibiting eating disorder symptoms. With this goal in mind discussion will include reviews of research that describes the presentation of eating disorders in women of color and the suggestions of why some women of color are exhibiting more symptoms than others.

Presenters

Mary Douglas Swoboda, LCSW is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker practicing at Counseling and Psychological Services at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She has her undergraduate degree from the University of Denver, Denver, Colorado and her Masters in Social Work from the University of Nebraska at Omaha. She developed an interest in the area of mental health for youth as part of her professional interest in multi-cultural issues. This has included some consultation with Multi-Cultural Affairs at the University and also work on the eating disorders team for treatment of eating disorders. She has also done some work in the area of disaster mental health.

Charlesette W. Foster, MA received both her bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Alabama (Tuscaloosa). She currently is a therapist with Counseling and Psychological Services at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She participates in the Eating Disorders Treatment team and specializes in relationship therapy. Prior to coming to UNL, she worked at the University of Alabama Brewer-Porch Children's Center as an administrator and therapist. She currently serves on the Governor's Commission for the Protection of Children and the McNair Scholar's Advisory Board.