

“Growing up in ‘TrackTown USA’ makes it hard to ignore the fitness fanatics, and if you have an eating disorder, every person is a game of comparison,” Stewart says. “A lot of people are very athletic, which makes it easy to hide dissatisfaction behind obsessive workouts.”

And, of course, our town celebrates thoughtful eating. You can have a moral or health objection to just about anything and find appropriate accommodations. Klose has noticed girls using our culture of elaborate food constructs to restrict. They go vegetarian, vegan, gluten- and dairy-free, “not for any moral or health reason, but in the vein of restricting.”

ROOTED IN ANXIETY

Fostering a distressed body image will not necessarily lead to an eating disorder. Bulimia, binge eating and anorexia are classified as anxiety disorders, which psychologists think may be genetic.

“Biology loads the gun,” Klose says, “but society pulls the trigger.” According to Klose, women are trying to manage anxiety, stress and even PTSD with an eating

disorder. “When a person restricts or purges, it will slow down neurotransmitters in such a way that it will be calming. There is a chemical response in the brain. You feel better, but the response erodes over time.”

Stewart describes that confluence of influence. “My struggle with body image started as a result of being heavily immersed in ballet culture, where perfectionism and long body lines are sought after,” she says. “I felt like being skinny would make me successful and admired, and make my mother proud.”

At 13, she continues, “I began counting calories every day and judging the success of my days based on how much I ate. Days over 1,000 calories were a failure. My mother is a recovered bulimic and told me about her eating disorder in great detail, so I had a ‘role model’ of sorts as I grew into my own eating disorder.”

BODY DISTRESS BEGINS AT HOME

“Family influence is important, and research shows that parents who diet and value a thin ideal have daughters who struggle to achieve that ideal,” Larson says. Klose

says that the negative language adults use towards their bodies in a household directly impacts kids, and if kids are seeing an adult restrict or binge, they are learning that’s OK.

Stewart’s reflection gives a frightening illustration of that point. “My mother was an alcoholic and was abusive during my childhood, so as I reached high school, I began using food as a means to cope with the pain and guilt I was feeling,” she says. “I had seen my mother binge before, often while intoxicated, and I saw how she used food to numb her feelings. This led to a very secretive relationship with food, where I was for all appearances a ‘health freak,’ but would then go home and binge on ice cream and pizza. Being in control of what I ate made me feel powerful, like I had my life together, when I was really hurting inside.”

Media-raised mamas are key in understanding the persistence of body-image distress. Marketing to teens began in earnest in the 1970s. MTV was launched in 1980, and other teen-centered programming quickly followed. Thus the first group of women to grow up with the full-scale, destructive effects of media on body image is now parenting.

Living with body shame for the last 20 years, we seek to shield our daughters from that shame — not by smashing in our televisions and coming to peace with our bodies, but by trying to help our daughters stay slim.

We must be aware that every time we engage with media images, we are affected and make choices accordingly. Knowing the media is doing its best to make you feel your worst, you can decide if something is entertaining enough to be worth it.

As the adults in this situation, we need to find peace with our bodies. Perhaps we can follow Emi Stewart’s road: “For me, recovery has been about learning how to love myself. I had to let go of the guilt I held onto from my childhood, realize that none of it was my fault and learn how to acknowledge and express those emotions I had stuffed down for so long.” ■



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