Notice: body image issues/eating disorders

Americans are at war with their own bodies, and the problem is only getting worse
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Last week, two of my roommates and I sat on the couch as we watched a television series detailing the struggles of fictional teenage girls. This particular episode focused on a character battling an eating disorder, an all too common storyline for shows centered on young women.

As we watched, one of my roommates casually remarked, "You know, I think I was very close to having my own eating issues in high school. Like… very close."

I immediately looked at our other roommate, knowing only a few weeks prior she and I were sitting on the same couch when we admitted to each other we had faced eating and body image issues throughout periods of high school and college.

Perhaps the saddest part of this conversation – beyond the knowledge we had all battled a lack of love and respect for our bodies – was the fact that this was our first time talking about our experiences.

These are people I have been best friends with for years. They are women I love and share every detail with, yet we had not discussed something that so clearly had an impact on all of us.

We all went through similar things at similar times, yet we suffered alone and in silence.

The sad reality is many people deal with body image issues or eating disorders at some point. In fact, nearly 30 million people in the United States will develop an eating disorder in their lifetime. Statistics show 10,200 deaths each year are caused by eating disorders.

People of all ages face this, but the numbers regarding the impact on the younger demographic may be most alarming.

 According to the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (ANAD), 42% of first to third grade girls want to be thinner and between 35% and 57% of adolescent women partake in "crash dieting, fasting, self-induced vomiting, diet pills, or laxatives."

Given younger people are more vulnerable, it is easy to imagine issues regarding self-worth and confidence would be more exacerbated. These statistics should also bring into question why so many young people are concerned about weight and appearance, when they should still be engrossed in the joys of childhood.

And while younger individuals have always been at risk, the problem has recently worsened, with the rate of adolescents younger than 12 put in the hospital for eating disorders increasing by 119% in the last decade.

While body image, weight and eating issues are so commonly associated with women, men often suffer, as well. According to the National Eating Disorders Association, 10 million men living in the U.S. will struggle with an eating disorder at some point in their life.

Assuming someone's risk for an eating disorder based on sex or gender can actually put a person in more danger. Men are often diagnosed when the disease is more advanced, leading to more severe issues and a higher death rate.

Like many health issues, eating disorders also disproportionately impact minorities.

Research has shown BIPOC are asked less by doctors about eating disorder symptoms than white patients. They are also half as likely to have their disorders diagnosed and professionally treated.

As someone who cannot remember a time when I didn't struggle with body image issues, I am not surprised by any of these statistics.

Growing up, I was always one of the tallest in my grade. As many know, this gives both adults and peers free rein to comment on your height at any time, as if it is some sort of novelty.

Every time I saw someone I hadn't seen in a while, there was the routine, "Oh, you are getting so big! You are so tall for your age."

And even worse, there was the dreaded, "You are so tall *for a girl*."

Even at 21 years old, it seems I cannot go to a family holiday without someone joking, "Have you grown even more?"

While I always knew these observations were innocent and well-intentioned, there is a weird dynamic created when people are constantly commenting on your body. You become hyperaware of your size, wondering if it is always the first thing people notice when they look at you.

For me, this contributed to my desire to be thinner.

"If I am somehow smaller, will people stop commenting on my body?"

For many people, a struggle with your body - no matter how brief or long that struggle lasts – becomes a part of your identity. It consumes your thoughts, which not only impacts your perspective on yourself but also your entire perspective on life.

It can also dictate your daily habits, take a toll on relationships and even hinder your ability to enjoy some of the best moments life has to offer.

For anyone who has not dealt with these issues or who struggles to understand how it could be so damaging, I challenge them to consider: what would it be like to not walk past a mirror without critiquing yourself? What would it be like to be consumed by the fear that everyone around you is judging your body? What would it be like to fear something as basic as a bikini?

There have been several times in which I felt my issues with my body became a significant aspect of who I was as a person.

There was the summer between my freshman and sophomore years of high school, when I would force myself to go on a run in between twice daily swim practices.

There were the times I would eat the same small breakfast and lunch every day, craving control over my caloric intake.

And there were the times I would sporadically engage in harmful practices, despite knowing they were unhealthy.

While I am thankful my struggles did not progress, I am aware of the way these situations can take a physical and mental toll. I also understand that even when you learn to love yourself again, the pain and self-doubt linger.

Ultimately, we need more education and awareness brought to body image issues and eating disorders.

It is a difficult conversation to have and one that can trigger a significant amount of pain for certain people. But like many things, an open dialogue may facilitate early diagnosis, more inclusive care and prevention of unhealthy habits.

Young people in particular should be the target of comprehensive education measures.

My memory of the discussion of body image or eating disorders in middle and high school health class is practically nonexistent. I am almost positive it did not go far beyond my teacher awkwardly reading a dictionary definition of anorexia and bulimia from a PowerPoint. And I think this is the reality at all too many American schools.

Given that younger populations are becoming more vulnerable, schools should incorporate more programs to promote body positivity and the importance of diverse body types. Young people should also be taught how to recognize unhealthy habits, given it can be difficult for those who are uneducated on the topic to even realize the dangers of certain practices.

As a society, we also need to be more aware of how bodies are portrayed in media, particularly on social media platforms. This includes more companies using images of diverse body types, showing people of all ages that all body types are beautiful and valuable.

Exhaustive steps need to be taken and widespread education needs to occur to prevent future generations from battling something that impacts so many but feels so isolating.