

Eating Disorders: Schools Might Be Adding to the Problem -- A Student Personal Perspective*

The introduction of school programs to fight obesity might be contributing to eating disorders. That is, many young students may not be thinking much about weight and body image until introduced to programs stressing how to prevent obesity and lose weight.

While it is undeniable that mental and physical health are closely linked to school performance, the push to help students stay healthy and the fight against obesity are heavily focused on a nutritious diet and physical activity. Little attention is paid to implications for creating negative body image and eating disorders. For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) list a variety of measures and proposals emphasizing a high amount of physical activity in students and calling on school nurses to measure students' BMI. While this is viewed as beneficial for countering obesity rates, the question arises: *Does it also increase the rate of students who develop negative body image and eating disorders?* For schools the dilemma is: *How does a school promote health and counter both obesity and eating disorders?*

In general, schools prioritize improving academic performance and marginalize efforts to address mental health concerns (e.g., see Adelman & Taylor, 2010). In doing so, they tend to downplay a focus on problems such as eating disorders (Green & Venta, 2018).

As a former sufferer of anorexia, I once personally experienced this "academics first" mentality at my high school. After fainting from donating blood (as I was well below the required minimum weight to donate), I walked into my math class late after recovering in the nurse's office and was chastised by my teacher and asked to take the scheduled test despite my explanation. A few of my high school teachers did notice the changes in my behavior and recent withdrawal. I found out years later that several officials at my school suspected I had an eating disorder and simply said nothing. When asked about whether or not my high school had any sort of training or awareness about symptoms of eating disorders, a former teacher answered that they did not. I had assumed nobody noticed my eating disorder even though a large part of me wished somebody had. To discover now that my wish was in fact true, but that the help I had wanted and couldn't bring myself to ask for still didn't come, is disheartening and largely due to a gap in school policy.

On the positive side of all this, my AP Psychology class in high school screened the HBO documentary "Thin", and it was through this exposure that I first recognized and identified with the diagnosed women on the screen, and that I first realized I wanted and needed help. This catalyst for my internal recognition and acceptance of the disorder was a key moment at the beginning of my journey for recovery, and without this class I could have lost many more months without proper understanding of what I was doing to myself. Such classes and exposure techniques are not just prevention strategies but also hands-off indirect methods of intervention – so subtle in design but so effective in their ability to ring true to certain students who might not have had representations of the disorder displayed to them outside of their own distorted perceptions of themselves.

Adelman, H.S., & Taylor, L. (2010). *Mental health in schools: Engaging learners, preventing problems, improving schools*. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press.

Center for MH & Student/Learning Supports (2014). *Eating disorders and schools*. Los Angeles: Author at UCLA. <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/eatingdis.pdf>

Center for MH & Student/Learning Supports (2015). *About obesity and schools*. Los Angeles: Author at UCLA <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/obesity.pdf>

Green, E. T., & Venta, A. (2018). Lack of implementation of eating disorder education and prevention programs in high schools: Data from incoming college freshmen. *Eating Disorders*, 26, 430-447. doi:10.1080/10640266.2018.1453629

See also our Center's online clearinghouse Quick Find on *Body Image/ Eating Disorders/ Obesity* http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p3006_01.htm

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