

## Eating Disorders Kept Secret

LAWRENCEVILLE - Because there is no single cause for an eating disorder, experts say diagnosis and treatment can be tricky. They stress that disorders may develop as the result of a combination of biological, psychological, social and family issues.

Eating disorders are currently in the spotlight, as February is National Eating Disorder Awareness Month in the United States. Specifically, National Eating Disorder Awareness Week runs from Feb. 22 through Feb. 28.

Katie Clark, Nurse Practitioner at the Lawrence County Memorial Hospital Primary Care Clinic, says that as many as 20 million American women and 10 million American men will deal with an eating disorder in their lifetime.

Because Lawrence County is a rural area, she says, eating disorders are often not openly talked about.

“It probably affects more people (in Lawrence County) than what we’re aware of,” she said. “It’s just the stigma, like with mental health disorders, and people don’t talk about it a lot of times.”

A commonly held view is that eating disorders are a lifestyle choice, although health experts are in agreement that that this is a fallacy. Actually the disorders are serious and sometimes fatal illnesses that cause severe disturbances to a person’s eating behaviors. Obsessions with food, body weight and shape may also signal an eating disorder. Common eating disorders include anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge-eating disorder.

“(Eating disorders) are definitely not a lifestyle choice,” said Clark. “A lack of a healthy self-image is usually the reason. As providers we have to be diligent and we need to understand the different types of eating disorders, and how each patient is affected. Not every patient is going to be the typical one, with Bulimia or Anorexia.”

The first step, according to Clark, is proper diagnosis.

“It’s important that people know the sooner they address the problem, the better the outcome,” she said. “The treatment plan for every eating disorder is not the same. The provider has to be able to look at that patient and determine the correct diagnosis, based on that patient’s status.”

There are a variety of treatment options depending upon the patient, including in-patient, residential or partial hospitalization.

“A lot of the treatment is geared at supervising meals and meeting with a dietician to discuss what a healthy meal choice is,” Clark said. “There are different treatment options depending upon the severity of the case. But the sooner you discover the eating disorder, the better the treatment options are and the more likely you are to have successful stories in the end.”

Clark says treatment for an eating disorder in Lawrence County may be “limited.” More options, though, may be on the way.

“Bigger cities have bigger resources,” she said. “But counseling is one of the best resources. Behavioral therapy is one of the best resources as well, and both of those are available here.”

Lawrence County Memorial Hospital already offers telepsychology, Clark says. So it’s not far-fetched to think that specialized teletherapy for eating disorders may not be far away.

Most who suffer from eating disorders, Clark says, are filled with guilt. Likely, she says, guilt is what causes the problems in the first place.

“We want to make sure the patients know ahead of time that there is no judgement,” she said. “They have no reason to feel guilty. It happens, and it’s something we can help them deal with. We can take the guilt out of that equation.”

Finally, Clark says that success in dealing with an eating disorder “depends upon the person.”

“If you have a person who is driven, and is willing to go through the steps to determine what the underlying problem is that led to the eating disorder, you can deal with the issue,” Clark said. “If you go to the counseling and do the work, you’re going to have success.”

Like with other addictions, however, it often times takes more than one attempt to realize success.

“The hard part is thinking that the first time is going to work,” she said. “That’s 100 percent false. Most of the time recovery doesn’t work the first time, it takes multiple times. The patient has to be ready for that.”

For more information about eating disorders, contact the LCMH Primary Care Clinic at 943-1000.

Facts and information about eating disorders :

- The average age for the onset of eating disorders is 19 for Anorexia Nervosa, 20 for Bulimia Nervosa and 25 for Binge Eating Disorder.
- Websites offering helpful information include those of the National Eating Disorder Association ([www.eatingdisorders.com](http://www.eatingdisorders.com)), the Every Body is Beautiful organization ([www.nedawarness.org](http://www.nedawarness.org)) and the Eating Disorders Hope organization ([www.eatingdisordershope.com](http://www.eatingdisordershope.com)).
- Effective prevention of eating disorders should address learning how to live a healthy lifestyle through nutritious eating and physical activity, understanding that self-worth is not purely defined by physical appearance, challenging society’s misleading messages about beauty, developing realistic expectations of self and body image and accepting one’s physical characteristics.
- To get help contact the National Eating Disorders Helpline at 1-800-931-2237.