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GENERATION HEALTH

'I Sobbed Over Eating A Slice of Pizza:' Pandemic Fuels Increase In Eating Disorders

By Alison Cross July 29, 2021

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Rory M. sobbed in her kitchen.

It was just after 7:30 on a frosty winter night, and her dad had baked a pizza for the family. She wanted dinner, but no matter how much she tried to bring herself to eat a slice, she could not do it. The panic was too much.

"The guilt you feel is literally like you just murdered someone. If I ate ... I literally can't even explain it," Rory, a college student in Connecticut, said. "I sobbed over eating a slice of pizza at 7:30. That sounds so absurd. And in the moment, you know it's absurd, but you also know that's the only way you're going to feel safe, and the only thing that's going to help your anxiety is to listen to your eating disorder."

It was December of 2020, and the eating disorder that crept into Rory's life during the COVID-19 lockdown had taken total control. It consumed her thoughts, robbed her strength, and threatened her health—Rory knew she needed help.

Following the start of the pandemic, eating disorder support group membership increased, waitlists for recovery treatment grew, and hospitalizations of patients with eating disorders nearly doubled in the Hartford HealthCare network.

Experts say those trends are no coincidence; among other factors, the increased downtime, isolation and anxiety experienced during the pandemic lockdowns created the perfect conditions for eating disorders to form and flourish.

Data on eating disorders is limited, and few studies on the pervasiveness of the condition have taken place since 2010. According to a 2007 survey cited by the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders, 30 million U.S. residents will suffer from an eating disorder. A 2014 publication by Silver Hill Hospital of New Canaan estimated that more than 72,000 women and 35,000 men in Connecticut have an eating disorder.

"Absolutely, the pandemic exacerbated those with disordered eating and/or eating disorders," said Amy Dunham, a registered dietitian and head nutrition coordinator of UConn Student Health and Wellness (SHAW).

Between April 2019 and March 2020, Dunham said that less than 25% of all new-patient appointments made in SHAW's nutrition department were for eating disorders. This number increased to almost 30% from April 2020 to March 2021, even though only about half of the student population returned to campus for the 2020-2021 school year.

"That's significant in my book," Dunham said. "We know that eating disorders increased as well as those needing a higher level of care."

Dunham explained that heightened fear, social isolation, perceived loss of control, routine disruptions, triggering living situations, diet culture normalization, and hyperfocus on social media fitness and food trends increased the chances of developing an eating disorder or relapsing during the pandemic.

"Eating disorders are viewed as a means of control and emotion regulation and even viewed as emotion avoidance disorders," Dunham said. "Anyone can get an eating disorder. We see it in all folks, all people, and it's pretty significant in all communities."

Dunham said that post-pandemic discussions of the "Quarantine 15" weight gain are also damaging.

"There's significant weight stigma in our society, pandemic or no pandemic, but to have a statement of 'Quarantine 15,' that's reinforcing it more," Dunham said. "Dieting is the gateway drug to an eating disorder. So if we're dabbling in those behaviors enough, we're increasing our risk, and it's a slippery slope to developing an eating disorder."

Dunham said misconceptions can sometimes prevent people from accessing care. She said that too often when people think of eating disorders, they think of a white, significantly underweight, cisgender girl.

"If I don't fit in that box of what is viewed as an eating disorder, and I don't think I'm as sick as that, or I don't view it that way, or I don't look that way, or I'm a different background, or I identify as male, or I identify as transgender ... If I don't fit in that stereotypical mold, I may not seek help," Dunham said.

Rory remained in denial of her eating disorder, even after entering an online recovery program. Friends and family praised her for looking "healthy." She ate breakfast, lunch and dinner. She never weighed herself or cared about becoming thin—she restricted food to feel in control and numb her emotions. Rory felt she did not fit the image of a person struggling with an eating disorder, so she told herself she must not have one.

After nearly a year of dealing with undereating and over-exercising through the pandemic, insomnia, anxiety, hair loss, ill-fitting clothes, shivering, exhaustion, canceled plans, numbness, irritability, chest pain, fainting episodes, concentration problems, and fine motor skill loss, the final straw for Rory was a heart scare.

As part of her recovery, Rory had to record her vital signs every day. One morning in February, her resting heart rate dipped dangerously low. The eating disorder recovery team instructed Rory to seek medical assistance immediately.

"They said, 'You need to go to the hospital right now. You are not OK,'" Rory said.

She drove herself to the local urgent care facility, where doctors and nurses hooked her up to an electrocardiogram, or EKG.

"I realized that if I didn't stop, I was going to die," she said. "My heart rate would be so low I would literally go to sleep and think, 'Am I going to wake up in the morning?' The fear that I felt that day was so bad. And I was like 'I'm never feeling that way again.'"

From that day forward, Rory said she fully committed to recovery and changed her life for the better.

"I feel like a different person after recovery. Before, with my eating disorder, I was living on autopilot. You don't realize how much choice and intention you live your life with. But after it, I realized how every single part of my life is a chance for me to become the best person I can be," she said. "I can't express how grateful I am."

With the support of friends, family and her recovery team, Rory continues to improve her relationship with food. She is back to a healthy weight, and most of her physical symptoms have receded.

Determined to do more for others, Rory began designing an educational farm program that helps kids form positive associations with the food that fuels their bodies both physically and emotionally. She also became more open with sharing her struggle with her eating disorder.

"I think any kind of mental illness is hard to talk about when you're going through it because the shame is there," she said. "I felt so alone during my experience, and if talking about it can help someone else be more comfortable to talk about theirs and make them feel less alone and help them get help, that's so important to me."

National Eating Disorders Association Helpline call/text: (800) 931-2237.

Alison Cross, a senior at the University of Connecticut, writes about the most pressing health, wellness and safety issues affecting people ages 18-40. To reach her, email alison.cross@uconn.edu.

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