

Do TV shows, Web sites fuel eating disorders?

Critics take aim at 'Starved,' 'Fat Actress' and 'pro-ana' online forums

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Last month, FX network launched a sitcom called "Starved" about the lives of four thirty-something friends living in Brooklyn. The set-up may sound like any other situation comedy aimed at young, single viewers, but "Starved" has an unprecedented twist. The friends — three men and one woman — all have eating disorders.

Some experts warn that shows such as "Starved" and "Fat Actress," which debuted this year on Showtime and depicts the efforts by Kirstie Alley's character to lose weight, including taking laxatives, are no joke when it comes to our kids.

"I think what something like 'Starved' does is sort of normalize eating disorders," charges Susan S. Bartell, a psychologist in Port Washington, N.Y., who specializes in treating teens, many with eating disorders. "It may leave impressionable adolescents with the notion that eating disorders are so normal we can joke about them on television. And that's really not the case. Eating disorders are serious, scary and for some they are truly life-threatening."

Indeed, according to the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA), anorexia nervosa has the highest mortality rate of any mental illness. There are approximately 10 million females and 1 million males in the U.S. who struggle with eating disorders.

A lesson plan?

Bartell's concern has to do with how instructive the shows are about eating disorder behaviors. "If you watch ['Starved'], for kids who are tending toward an eating disorder, it teaches them how to do it," she says. "It talks about using laxatives, exercising for hours on end, restricting food, throwing up after eating ... it's kind of like a lesson plan, so to speak."

In response to a request for comment, the show "Starved" issued the following statement: "Eric Schaeffer, who plays 'Sam' and is also Starved's creator, is no stranger to the show's themes and subject matter and speaks openly about his own addictions. He believes he's not alone in battling his food demons. 'While addiction, like life, is often dark and terrifying, recovery comes from mining our true humanity, with all its pathos, hope, love and humor,' says Schaeffer. 'I think everyone — addicts and non-addicts alike — will identify with our characters' journeys.'"

In recent months, eating disorder specialists have also warned parents about certain Web sites and blogs called "pro-ana" (pro-anorexic) because users often share tips on how to perpetuate an eating disorder.

Yet Bartell says television is still more troubling.

"TV is so real and accessible for anybody and everybody," she says. "My concern is that a TV show could push someone in the direction of having a disorder. They may start to dabble in the disordered eating. They may not even feel like it's so dangerous but once they get started they may not be able to stop."

After the first episode of "Starved" in early August, NEDA immediately issued a release calling the show "tasteless and dangerous" and urging viewers to boycott it and the advertisers. The organization also took a similar stance when "Fat Actress" began airing.

Influence of family, friends

Yet NEDA spokesperson Jessica Weiner, an eating disorder survivor who has authored two books on the subject — “A Very Hungry Girl” and the upcoming “Do I Look Fat In This?” — says we have to be careful where we point the finger of blame.

“The media is a very easy scapegoat,” says Weiner. “But no show taught me how to have an eating disorder. I learned more from friends and from what I saw with my own family members. That’s the more typical route.”

According to Andrew B. Geier, a psychology researcher at the University of Pennsylvania, what we know about weight and eating disorders is, indeed, that kids tend to be influenced by their peers and, most seriously, from the body image problems and disordered eating of their families.

“If you look at parental pressure to lose weight — whether parents are fairly critical of weight and whether there’s a lot of maternal investment in how thin daughters are, there’s definitely a correlation with eating disorders in girls,” says Geier. Mothers of girls with eating disorders, he notes, tend to have a higher incidence of such problems.

Yet, of course, this doesn’t let the media off the hook. How teens — and the rest of us — interpret the “ideal” body has been intractably influenced by Western media. Geier and colleagues, for example, found in one study published in the journal *Eating and Weight Disorders* that “before and after” diet ads perpetuate the erroneous notion that weight is easily controlled and further the stigma and ire that already exist against overweight people.

Some of the most intriguing findings on eating disorders depart from the family and societal influences and focus on the issue of brain chemistry, though.

Last year a study published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* found that people suffering from an eating disorder were more than twice as likely than a control group to have had childhood anxiety disorders. In this month’s *Archives of General Psychiatry* a link was further made with anxiety and eating disorders. A study by Ursula F. Bailer, a researcher in the Department of Radiology at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, and colleagues found that women who have had a certain type of anorexia nervosa show an alteration in the activity of serotonin, a brain chemical that is widely associated with anxiety, even more than a year after recovery. Further investigation is needed but there is some speculation that serotonin problems perhaps contribute to the onset of eating disorders.

What parents can do

With so many internal and external factors in play, what can parents do to help protect their children from dangerous eating habits?

First, understand that eating disorders are real and can be deadly, yet they are still — thankfully — relatively rare.

“For every one person who has an eating disorder there are about 200 who are overweight,” says Geier. Of course, if your child suffered from obsessive-compulsive disorder or other anxiety disorders, you want to be even more tuned in to the possibility that an eating disorder could crop up.

By far, though, the best thing parents can do — even better than banning television shows and Web sites — is to check themselves. If you’re a chronic dieter, often talk disparaging about your own body or know that you worship thinness, you probably are unwittingly passing along body-image baggage to your child. Sometimes it’s just a matter of being more aware of your habits and attitudes.

Occasionally, though, parents may need professional help for their own disorder. (Weiner notes that it’s a myth that only young people are subject to eating disorders. An eating disorder can potentially become a problem for anyone at any point, and especially during times of stress, she says.)

Another wise move is to start talking to your kids about body images and dieting. Find out what they think and feel. Some teen magazines are starting to use more normal-size models rather than the dangerously thin ones we so often see. Advertisers such as Dove are also breaking ground by featuring women of various sizes clad in their skivvies (albeit for a thigh-firming lotion!).

When you see these images in the media or if your older children happen to catch one of the new television shows, use it as an opportunity to open a discussion. The more children are able to talk about the images they see, the more you're able to help them sort out fact from fiction (for example, that photos are often altered or that being "model-thin" isn't something to emulate; it's actually oftentimes a life-threatening disease).

You can also help establish a link between body health and being successful and productive in life. Courtney Macavinta, co-author with Andrea Vander Pluym of a new book for teen girls called "Respect: A Girl's Guide to Getting Respect & Dealing When Your Line is Crossed," says eating disorders at their very essence are a form of self abuse.

"I think things will change when women and girls understand that respecting their bodies is part of respecting themselves," Macavinta says. "We need to start teaching girls especially to view their bodies as cherished tools, treasures. If you're not taking care of your body, you're not going to reach your potential."

"Respect" encourages teens to question the media, society's body image ideals and our homogenous, celebrity worship culture. Macavinta, who says she also suffered from an eating disorder growing up, says another essential link is the mind-body connection.

"I don't want to sound too New Agey but, really, introducing kids to meditation, walking, yoga — anything that quiets the mind and lets them focus — can be helpful," says Macavinta.

She notes that once a girl's mind is quiet she can think for herself. And she may even think, "Hey, I've had enough of this distraction with my thighs and butt. What I really need to know is how to treat my body right so it gets me to the White House someday."

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