
Sexual Abuse And Eating Disorders In Women

Mental illnesses are difficult enough to manage in daily life, but traumatizing experiences can cause someone's mental health to deteriorate. Women have always been more susceptible to certain mental illnesses and traumatizing experiences such as eating disorders and sexual abuse due to societal norms or being seen as weak. A victim of sexual abuse can have mental effects after their traumatizing experience such as PTSD, depression, and self-harm. One of the questions that have been greatly asked is whether developing an eating disorder is directly correlated with sexual abuse. After several years of seeking the answer, researchers were able to conclude that sexual abuse is not correlated with the development of an eating disorder for all survivors. Because not all survivors can testify that they developed an eating disorder due to being abused researchers have claimed that developing an eating disorder is a risk factor rather than a direct effect.

In the article "Sexual Abuse and Eating Disorders: A Review" by Mary E. Connors and Wayne Morse, some researchers had case studies where certain women had developed eating disorders and had been sexually abused at some point in their lives and made them wonder if the two phenomena's were correlated (Crisp, 1984; Goldfarb, 1987; Sloan & Leichner, 1986). In a study (1985) in which 78 women diagnosed with an eating disorder (anorexia, bulimia, or both) were asked to fill out a survey in which they disclosed their sexual experiences which included being sexually abused. The researchers found that out 50 of the 78 had been victims of any type of sexual abuse, but they did not find any correlation between the form of abuse and type of eating disorder (2).

In a different study (1988), 172 women diagnosed with bulimia entered a treatment program where they answered a questionnaire asking they were ever victims to rape (childhood or adulthood) or physical abuse (partner or family). The results that they received struck a chord in the researchers, " Sixty-six per cent of the women had been physically victimized, with 28.5% reporting child sexual abuse" (2). Researchers were then able to conclude that the women did not develop their eating disorders because of their "victimization" (2), but rather they developed bulimia as a way to cope with the way the felt.

Victims of sexual abuse tend to develop feelings of hopelessness, anger, disgust, and shame towards themselves. They can change themselves drastically so something won't happen to them again. Television shows can demonstrate this same behaviour, they depict a fun flirty teenage girl who likes to go out with her friends and party, but once she becomes a victim of sexual abuse the audience can see the complete turn she does to her lifestyle. The same girl who felt so alive now feels like a shell of the person she was, she no longer wears short skirts and makeup because the more she draws the attention from herself the lower the possibility of her being attacked again becomes. This same kind of action can be seen with eating habits, a person may develop anorexia in order to seem less desirable. The article gives several examples of the development of eating disorders, "For example, one anorexic patient quite consciously began to starve herself in order to be unappealing to her sexually abusive brother, and another patient developed anorexia after being forced to perform oral sex during a rape. Other patients have reported binge eating with large weight gains that they found reassuring in assuaging their feelings of vulnerability following sexual predation." (9).

Traumatizing experiences can cause extreme changes in a victims life, from the way they dress to their eating habits. Not all victims develop eating disorders but all victims are at risk of forming one in order to cope with their feelings. What can be learned from this is that these victims are not at fault and need help to channel a healthy way of coping with the way they feel.

Reference

1. Connors, M. E., & Morse, W. (1993). Sexual Abuse and Eating Disorders: A Review. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 13(1), 1–11.
2. <http://eds.b.ebscohost.com.aclibproxy.idm.oclc.org/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=c4d967d7-2b3b-44e1-b988-67964f8f1b3f%40pdv-v-sessmgr01>