Article

Why Do Teenagers Develop Eating Disorders?

Yifei Gong

StStephen's Episcopal School, Austin, TX 78746, USA

Abstract: Why do teenagers develop eating disorders? First, teenagers are exposed to contents on social media which can promote unhealthy eating habits. Second, parental communication can have a powerful impact on how young people view their bodies and eating habits. Third, besides the mentioned factors, perfectionism is the desire to want to take control of everything, which can contribute to strict control over their weight. This paper will discuss how these factors play a role in the development of eating disorders and what can be done to lessen their occurrence and promote healthy eating behaviors and positive, realistic body image in teenagers.

Keywords: teenagers; eating disorders; social media; family dynamic; perfectionism

1. Introduction

Have you ever experienced or witnessed someone else going overboard with their diet in an attempt to get a thinner body, or eating too much even when you're already full? These could be signs of eating disorders. When you think of eating disorders, teenagers often come to mind. The National Institute of Mental Health has reported a 2.7 percent lifetime prevalence of eating disorders among U. S. adolescents aged 13 to 18 [1]. The prevalence prompts the study in this article to further explore the factors that influence eating disorders in the hope of to inform more studies and patients in the future.

2. Rationale

2.1. Social Media

According to Search Logistics, teens aged 13 to 18 years old spend an average of 3 hours a day on social media [2]. A common activity for teenagers on social media is to compare themselves with peers. Research finds that unhappiness often comes with comparison and when teens compare their pictures upward, which means they look for better pictures on the social media, can lead to negative evaluations of themselves [3]. For example, a girl may see a beautiful bikini on social media and buy it. Then she finds that the model on social media wears it better than herself from which she forms body dissatisfaction. She may control her diet to get closer to the good figure she sees on social media, which can eventually increase the risk of her picking up irregular eating habits, and in turn, developing eating disorders.

In addition, in social media, people post photos that are embellished and photo-edited to show a better side of themselves. Through photo shop, people may feel that they are closer to the society's definition of beauty [4]. The edited photos might contribute to teenagers to find the difference between the imperfect self in reality and the seemingly perfect body in social media, which may lead to greater body dissatisfaction [5].

Teenagers may be exposed to content that glorifies eating disorders, social media groups in particular, such

as those promoting eating disorders, can influence how young people perceive them. Social groups are described in the Social Identity Theory, a social psychological analysis of the role of self-conception in group membership, group processes, and intergroup relations [6]. For example, when people in the group view eating disorders positively, it leads one to recognize that eating disorders can bring positive effects, and spread this view to others, that is, other people in the group [7]. When allowed to be a part of one of these groups, adolescents are more likely to develop eating disorders to conform to the body image of those already in the group [8].

2.2. Family Dynamics

After entering adolescence, the relationship between teenagers and their parents play a crucial role in their mental health, as unhealthy family dynamics can present a significant risk throughout the teenagers' development. Family closeness can greatly affect the likelihood of a young person developing an eating disorder because the positive relationship is more likely to provide teenagers with a good state of emotion [9]. Family intimacy, such as being able to communicate freely about problems in the family, reflects the family system's healthy functioning and determines whether the teenagers in the family are at risk for developing an eating disorder [10].

Moreover, parents' understanding of their children's perspectives can affect the chances of adolescents developing eating disorders. Studies have found that adolescents with eating disorders felt that there was a problem in the family more than their parents, reflecting different perspectives in a family [11, 12]. This highlights the importance of understanding families as a whole, which can provide support to the patients [13].

Parents' behaviors may also contribute to modeling behavior of young people [14]. If parents do not have good eating patterns, teenagers can more easily imitate their parents' behaviors and start bad eating habits. Parents should strive to support and accept the teenager as an independent individual. When teenagers receive unconditional love from their parents, they will manage their eating habits for health rather than approaching the ideal thinness. On the contrary, parents' judgment and non-acceptance lead to the estrangement of family relations, which might contribute to parents' neglecting of the adolescents' illness and can prolong the disorder.

2.3. Perfectionism

Understanding these family dynamics is crucial, as well as other psychological factors influencing teenagers' well-being, such as perfectionism. Perfectionism is defined in psychology as "the tendency to demand of others or of oneself an extremely high or even flawless level of performance, in excess of what is required by the situation" [15]. Perfectionism often leads to teenagers having high standards for all aspects of themselves, including their bodies, which makes them want to control their body shape, and might contribute to a greater risk of developing eating disorders [16].

Teenagers also have developed self-efficacy, which is the "belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments" [17 – 19]. When things do not go according to their expectations, self-criticism will arise, and teenagers will develop the insecurity of unable to control their lives [20]. The feel of failure impacts their life dissatisfaction, which further aggravates their eating habits to control their life situations [21].

Along with self-criticism, when teenagers achieve their goals, the satisfaction of having achieved them is easily replaced by the pressure to achieve the next goal, leading them to lose sight of their achievements. This frequent frustration and lack of self-affirmation can also make teenagers more prone to eating disorders [22]. This is because they might end up pushing themselves further for affirmation, which might lead them to have uncontrollable eating habits or vicious eating cycles.

3. Discussion

This research paper discussed three factors related to eating disorders: social media, family dynamics, and perfectionism. Social media has exposed teenagers to unhealthy online groups or seemingly perfect content, leading them to restrict their diet to achieve their ideal body shapes. Low levels of understanding, support and

closeness in a family can lead to adolescents' estrangement from the family and reluctance to communicate, which further worsens the eating disorder. Perfectionism causes teenagers to have high requirements for their body shape and the completion of goals, resulting in serious control over their diet, which gives them an illusion that they seem to control their life. Eating disorders are complex, and this article only discusses three factors. For instance, this paper does not discuss the physiological factors. Future studies can study eating disorders more comprehensively through experiments and further research. It is hoped that future studies can further explore the eating disorders of adolescents, and try to minimize the occurrence of eating disorders on young people as much as possible.

Funding

Not applicable.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

1　National Institute of Mental Health. Eating Disorders. Available online: https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/eating-disorders#part_2573 (accessed on 27 August 2024).

2　Woodward M. Social Media Addiction Statistics for 2024. Available online: https://www.searchlogistics.com/learn/statistics/social-media-addiction-statistics/ (accessed on 23 June 2024).

3　Burnell K, George MJ, Vollet JW, *et al*. Passive Social Networking Site Use and Well-Being: The Mediating Roles of Social Comparison and the Fear of Missing out. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace* 2019; **13(3)**. https://doi.org/10.5817/cp2019-3-5.

4　Bell K. Social Media and Female Body Image. Digital Commons. Available online: https://vc.bridgew.edu/honors_proj/173/ (accessed on 10 May 2016).

5　Perloff RM. Social Media Effects on Young Women's Body Image Concerns: Theoretical Perspectives and an Agenda for Research. *Sex Roles* 2014; **71(11–12)**: 363–377. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-014-0384-6.

6　Hogg MA. Social Identity Theory. In *Contemporary Social Psychological Theories*, 2nd ed.; Burke PJ, Ed.; Stanford University Press: Redwood City, CA, USA, 2018; pp. 112–138.

7　Ison J, Kent S. Social Identity in Eating Disorders. *European Eating Disorders Review* 2010; **18(6)**: 475–485. https://doi.org/10.1002/erv.1001.

8　Dane A, Bhatia K. The Social Media Diet: A Scoping Review to Investigate the Association between Social Media, Body Image and Eating Disorders Amongst Young People. *PLoS Global Public Health* 2023; **3(3)**: e0001091. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pgph.0001091.

9　Henry CS, Robinson LC, Neal RA, *et al*. Adolescent Perceptions of Overall Family System Functioning and Parental Behaviors. *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 2006; **15(3)**: 308–318. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-006-9051-z.

10　Kog E, Vandereycken W. Family Interaction in Eating Disorder Patients and Normal Controls. *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 1989; **8(1)**: 11–23.

11   Cicchetti D. The Emergence of Developmental Psychopathology. *Child Development* 1984; **55(1)**: 1. https://doi.org/10.2307/1129830.

12   Cummings EM, Davies PT, Campbell SB. *New Directions in the Study of Parenting and Child Development*. In Developmental Psychopathology and Family Process: Theory, Research, and Clinical Implications; New York, NY, USA, 2000; pp. 200–250.

13   Holtom-Viesel A, Allan S. A systematic Review of the Literature on Family Functioning Across All Eating Disorder Diagnoses in Comparison to Control Families. *Clinical Psychology Review* 2014; **34(1)**: 29–43. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2013.10.005.

14   Londoño-Pérez C, Moreno Ruge AM. Factores Familiares y Personales Predictores de Trastornos de Conducta Alimentaria en jóVenes. *Anales De Psicología* 2017; **33(2)**: 235. https://doi.org/10.6018/analesps.33.2.236781.

15   APA Dictionary of Psychology. American Psychological Association. Available online: https://dictionary.apa.org/perfectionism (accessed on 19 April 2018).

16   Boone L, Soenens B, Luyten P. When or Why Does Perfectionism Translate into Eating Disorder Pathology? A Longitudinal Examination of the Moderating and Mediating Role of Body Dissatisfaction. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 2014; **123(2)**: 412.

17   Bandura A, National Inst of Mental Health. *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory*; Prentice-Hall, Inc.: Hoboken, NJ, USA, 1986.

18   Bandura A. *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*; Worth Publishers: New York, NY, USA, 1997.

19   Bandura A. Self-Efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change. *Psychological Review* 1977; **84(2)**: 191–215. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295x.84.2.191.

20   Bulik CM, Tozzi F, Anderson C, *et al*. The Relation between Eating Disorders and Components of Perfectionism. *The American Journal of Psychiatry* 2003; **160(2)**: 366–368.

21   Wade TD, O'Shea A, Shafran R. Perfectionism and Eating Disorders. In *Perfectionism*, *Health, and Well-Being*; Springer: Cham, Switzerland, 2015; pp. 205–222. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-18582-8_9.

22   Wade TD, Wilksch SM, Paxton SJ, *et al*. How Perfectionism and Ineffectiveness Influence Growth of Eating Disorder Risk in Young Adolescent Girls. *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 2015; **66**: 56–63. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.brat.2015.01.007.