Dancer thinks she may have an eating disorder

Dear Alice,

I am part of the dance department at my high school, and we often have specialists come in to talk about eating disorders. When they explain the symptoms of an anorexic, they all seem to sound like me, or almost every other teenage girl. My question is, other than a person's obvious appearance of being anorexic, how can you decide for yourself if you are or not? I do obsess a lot about my weight, and go without eating for a while, but if you look at me, I look of average weight. How do I know for sure?

Confused!

Answer

Dear Confused!,

It sounds as though your school did a good job in raising awareness of eating disorders, but you're fuzzy on whether or not this actually applies to you.

Lots of sports ? including dance ? focus on attaining a certain "body type." Some people are naturally born to look a certain way, while others are not. Striving for an ideal that is not always attainable (or even realistically possible) can lead some people to develop obsessions and unhealthy behaviors.

Eating disorders are not always "black and white." As a result, health care professionals use a designated set of criteria to medically diagnose an eating disorder. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition (DSM-IV), these include:

Anorexia Nervosa

- Refusal to maintain minimal body weight for age and height
- Intense fear of becoming fat or weight gain despite being underweight
- Misperception of body size and shape
- Missed three or more periods in a row

Bulimia Nervosa

- Regular and repeated binge eating bouts, followed by self-induced vomiting; misuse of laxatives, diuretics, enemas, or other drugs; starvation; or, excessive physical activity, to
prevent weight gain
- Both bingeing and compensatory behaviors take place about two or more times a week for at least three months
- Self-evaluation is overly based on body size and shape

Sometimes people exhibit certain conditions of these eating disorders, but not all. What does this mean? They could have disordered eating and/or body image distortions, but not a fully developed eating disorder. Even so, it is preferable for a health care professional to diagnose the situation, because s/he can then refer a patient to the right people. Obtaining the appropriate resources can help a person identify the issues behind the eating and/or body image concerns.

You may want to speak with a parent(s), trusted friend, teacher, or mentor about your thoughts. Perhaps you can also make an appointment with your health care provider and/or with one of the professionals who spoke at your school. S/he could assess your situation and help you develop a healthy relationship with food, your body, and dance.

For further information, eating disorder resources are available on the web, including:
- The National Eating Disorders Association [2]
- Anorexia Nervosa and Related Eating Disorders, Inc. [3]

Here's to dancing to the beat of healthy living,

Alice!

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