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Dancer thinks she may have an eating disorder ^[1]

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!,

Lots of sports — including dance — focus on attaining a certain "body type." Some people are genetically predisposed to look a certain way, while others aren't. Striving for an ideal that isn't always attainable (or even realistically possible) can lead some people to develop preoccupations and unhealthy eating behaviors. It sounds as though your school was successful in raising your awareness of eating disorders, but you're still fuzzy on whether or not this actually applies to you. The good news is that you don't have to figure it out on your own; there are tools and professionals available to help you.

Eating disorders are not always "black and white" and can be quite complex. As a result, health care professionals use a designated set of criteria to diagnose an eating disorder. It may be that an individual is engaging in a type of disordered eating or that they have body image distortions, or both. By the same token, sometimes people exhibit certain conditions of eating disorders, but not all. What does this mean? They could be engaging in disordered eating behaviors or have body image distortions, but do not officially meet the diagnostic criteria for an eating disorder. In any case, it's best for a health care professional to further investigate any suspected cases, because s/he can then refer a patient to other professionals who can provide additional support and resources. Obtaining the appropriate resources can help a person identify and address the issues behind any eating and body image concerns.

With that being said, there are some actions you can take to further explore your own behaviors and feelings around this issue. A resource that may be a helpful first step is the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) [Online Eating Disorder Screening Tool](#) [2]. This tool walks you through a set of questions to determine your risk for an eating disorder. If your results indicate that you may be at risk, you'll be linked to some additional information and resources. You may also want to speak with a parent, trusted friend, teacher, or mentor about your concerns. Alternatively, you could also make an appointment with your health care provider 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.

If you'd like to do a bit of additional reading on the topic, the [NEDA](#) [3] website has an abundance of information on eating disorders. You might also take a look at the related Q&As and others in the [Disordered Eating and Eating Disorders](#) [4] category in the *Go Ask Alice!* archives for even more information.

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

Alice!

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