

Introduction

- Sexual assault and eating disorders can affect anyone, regardless of age.
- Both influence the emotional, mental, and physical well-being of a person.
- People who have experienced sexual victimization are at a greater risk for developing an eating disorder as a consequential response and coping mechanism related to processing the trauma and emotions of sexual assault.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SEXUAL ASSAULT AND EATING DISORDERS

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Factors in Developing Eating Disorders

- Research has shown that trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder are major factors in developing eating disorders. Individuals who have experienced sexual trauma are at greater risk for developing eating disorders or exhibiting disordered eating behaviors.
- People who have been victimized by sexual assault are affected by short- and long-term conditions such as depression, anxiety, nightmares, flashbacks, chronic pain, substance use, and many other conditions.
- The median time between sexual trauma and the ED diagnosis has been reported as 3.4 years and the median time between sexual trauma and the onset of ED symptoms has been reported as less than 1 year.
- These timelines provide key information for those working with college-age students during the emerging and young adult years. Eating disorders typically begin between the ages of 19 and 25, aligning with the age of young adult college students.
- The Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) estimates that 13% of all students will experience rape or sexual assault during their college years and, 18 and 19-year-old freshmen and sophomores account for the highest risk and percentile categories.

Tellus, Lauritsen, Rodrigo-Domingo, 2021
RAINN, 2022
Palumbo, 2018

Complex Roots

- Eating disorders have complex roots. Traumatic acts of sexual assault such as rape, molestation, harassment, and other forms of abuse can act as catalysts for eating disorders.
- Sexual trauma survivors are more likely to use food as a coping mechanism. Abuse during childhood can lead to dissociative coping styles, one example being binge eating.
- Disordered eating behaviors, such as restricting food intake, bingeing and purging food, and overeating food, can serve as emotional releases in survivors' conscious or unconscious attempts to feel safer and restore a sense of power and control in the aftermath of sexual trauma.
- The article "Childhood Abuse and Risk of Eating Disorders in Women" by Rayworth, Wise, and Harlow stated: Abuse during childhood has long been hypothesized to be a risk factor for the development of eating disorders. Abuse can cause intolerable emotions and undermine identity. Eating disorders can serve as an attempt to regulate negative affect. Childhood sexual abuse could lead to a dissociative coping style that is later displayed in binge eating. Abuse also can make victims feel that they have no control over their lives, which could lead to self-starvation as a way to re-exert control.

Sesar, Šimić, & Barišić, 2010
Rayworth, Wise, and Harlow, 2004

Disconnection From Body

- People who have experienced sexual trauma may feel disconnected from their bodies and overwhelmed with emotions. Such trauma can manifest as body hatred, self-shame, or self-harm.
- Survivors can seek various forms of comfort or protection to help ease the emotional onslaught of confusion, shame, guilt, fear, anxiety, rage, and more and food/disordered eating behaviors can become sources of relief.
- As stated by Cohen, "food never abuses you, never hurts you, never rejects you, never dies. You get to say when, where, and how much". By using food as a coping mechanism and emotional release, sexual assault survivors are attempting – often, unconscious to the underlying reasons - to make themselves feel safer and to restore a sense of power and control in their lives.
- Brewerton, an expert in the field of trauma and eating disorders, compares binge eating and purging to abusing substances to self-medicate, decrease anxiety associated with the trauma, and avoid and forget a traumatic experience.

Cohen, 2020
NEDA, 2021

Eating Disorders

- According to National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA), "National surveys estimate that 20 million women and 10 million men in America will have an eating disorder at some point in their life".
- The National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) states that "these [eating disorder] behaviors serve as coping mechanisms and ways to manage difficult feelings and experiences".
- The mortality rate associated with anorexia nervosa is 12 times higher than the death rate of all causes of death for females 15 – 24 years old.
- A clinical study by Fichter and Quadflieg showed almost equal mortality rates in anorexia and bulimia and significantly higher mortality rates for eating disorders not otherwise specified (ED-NOS).
- Individuals with anorexia nervosa are more likely to have a history of bingeing and purging behaviors. Anywhere from 20-50% of people with anorexia will develop bulimia over time.



National Eating Disorders Association, 2021
Palumbo, 2018
Fichter and Quadflieg, 2016
Arcelus, Mitchell, Wales, & Nielsen, 2011

Why is This Important?

- It is critical to understand and recognize the signs of an eating disorder, sexually-based trauma, and the correlation between the two.
- Eating disorders are classified as a mental illness diagnosis and can result in long-term impairment and even death. Sexual assault trauma poses a greater risk for the occurrence of an eating disorder.
- Being a person who can recognize the warning signs empowers one with the insight and ability to reach out to someone who may desperately need a helping hand and support.
- Critical reflection: I appreciate the value of those who have awareness and knowledge and can offer compassionate understanding and empathy. I will never hesitate to extend my hand to another person who has lost control and experienced trauma in their life. I am committed to supporting and empowering others on their own journeys of recovery and restoration.