Eating Disorders Affect Us All

By Stephanie Covington Armstrong
Author, Not All Black Girls Know How to Eat

Until recently it was a common misconception that only white women suffered from eating disorders. In 2005, The New York Times published an article debunking that myth, stating that Blacks now join the eating disorder mainstream. In the article, psychologist Dr. Gayle Brooks states, "We're noticing a trend of more severe eating disorders among African-American girls."

As the first African-American woman to write a book detailing the struggle with an eating disorder, I am acutely aware of the social stigmas attached to these issues. Growing up among “strong Black women” I witnessed family members battling depression and other emotional issues, despite attempts to keep problems hidden for fear of failing to live up to the black female archetype. For me, the eating disorder was one thing but the fear of revealing this to my community prolonged my problem. In order for me to heal I had to step outside of my comfort zone and admit that I had a problem. I took that first step towards healing and was able to get to the other side.

Over the past few years, there has been increasing evidence of disordered eating occurring among racial and ethnic minorities in the United States. Exact statistics on the prevalence of eating disorders among women of color are unavailable. Due to our historically biased view that eating disorders only affect white women, relatively little research has been conducted utilizing participants from racial and ethnic minority groups. Reports of eating disorders among women of color being on the rise may simply reflect an increase in the reporting of these problems rather than actual increases. Three factors affect the rate of reporting among minority women: underreporting of problems by the individual, under and misdiagnosing on the part of the treatment provider, and cultural bias of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-IV criteria for eating disorders.

In a 2003 study, published in The American Journal of Psychiatry, Dr. Ruth Striegel-Moore, professor and chairwoman of psychology at Wesleyan University, found that young black women were as likely as white women to report binge eating. Three years earlier, in a study published in Archives of Family Medicine, she found that black women were as likely as white
women to report binge eating or vomiting and were more likely to report fasting and abusing laxatives or diuretics than their white peers.

Dr. Striegel-Moore noted that minority women are less likely to seek treatment than their white counterparts, contributing to the perception of minority women as immune from eating disorders. Therapy is still not widely accepted in many minority communities and financial limitations only exacerbate the problem. Minority women face other barriers to getting care as well, Dr. Striegel-Moore said, including "lack of resources and insurance and not knowing who to contact."

We need to educate ourselves to the dangers of these diseases and their long term affects on our bodies. Early on I believed that needing help was a sign of weakness. Eventually I came to understand that asking for help and support requires strength. In time I was able to heal, emotionally, mentally and physically and to have a healthy, full and productive life. I look back at the years I spent fighting my eating disorder and I’m grateful that the only thing I lost was time.

**It is time to talk about it.** We need greater awareness and prevention efforts in all communities and access to treatment for all individuals affected. In our eating disorder outreach efforts, we must be attentive to factors affecting minority populations. These factors include differing worldviews, values, and beliefs; patterns of acculturation; effects of oppression; language barriers; and individual differences within every ethnic and racial group.

This National Eating Disorders Awareness Week, February 20-26, remember that **It’s Time to Talk About It.** Join the thousands of people across the country doing just one thing to start the conversation in their communities, schools and families. To learn more about the many fun and easy ways that you can be a part of this national movement and to register today, visit the NEDAwareness Week homepage under Programs & Events at [www.NationalEatingDisorders.org](http://www.NationalEatingDisorders.org). NEDA’s free national **Helpline:** 800 931-2237

**References**

