

New England Eating Disorders Program (NEED)

50 Moody St., Saco, ME 04072

Intake Line: (207) 294-4522

RISK FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH EATING DISORDERS

At NEED, we often hear questions such as, “*Why do I have an eating disorder?*” or “*Did I cause my child’s eating disorder?*” Worry and confusion commonly accompany concerns about an eating disorder and it is understandable to want to know the root causes. The truth, however, is that there is **no known cause of eating disorders**. The leading theory, based on research, is that eating disorders are multifactorial, which means that they are caused by the interaction of a series of factors. In other words, different individuals experience different combinations of risk factors that may ultimately trigger the disorder. Some individuals could experience numerous risk factors and never develop the disorder, while others may experience just a few risks and suffer from the illness. Though not sole causes, below are some factors that research shows may play a role in the development of an eating disorder.

Physical

- Biology
- Genetics
- Brain chemistry

Cultural

- Consistent exposure to disparaging messages about food and bodies
- Exposure to a weight-biased culture that associates happiness and success to a particular body type and appearance (e.g., Western culture’s promotion of the thin-ideal, which is the common perception that women should possess a slender, feminine physique)

Social/ Trauma

- Bullying
- Limited social support systems and isolation
- History of trauma

Psychological

- Temperament style (e.g., obsessive thinking, perfectionism, sensitivity to reward and punishment, harm avoidance, neuroticism, impulsivity, rigidity)
- Anxiety and depression
- Unhealthy self-esteem
- Distorted and/or negative body image
- Preoccupation with weight, shape, size, and/or food
- Cognitive inflexibility (i.e., an inability to easily shift from one thought to another, difficulty balancing both big picture and detail-oriented thinking, difficulty changing perspective)
- Coping skill deficits

Behavioral

- Dieting and fasting history
- History of overeating

Psychological treatments do not depend on identifying the causes of an eating disorder in order to effect change and work on recovery. The illness itself, and not the cause, is the focus of treatment.

If you, or someone you love, are interested in treatment for an eating disorder, please call our intake line at **(207) 294-4522**.