

Fight myths about eating disorders

Social pressure and deep-rooted psychological issues, rather than a desire to be slim, are often to blame, experts say

Nick Webster

DUBAI // Psychological issues could be behind the eating disorders experienced by up to a third of secondary school girls, rather than a desire to look slim, doctors said.

It is a common misconception that adolescents resorted to such extreme measures so as to appear slender, according to research at the Human Relations Institute and Clinics (HRIC) in Dubai.

Dr Thoraiya Kanafani, a HRIC clinical psychologist, compared the findings of two recent studies on the dietary habits of adolescent girls in the UAE.

In Sharjah, a survey found that 37.8 per cent of schoolgirls aged between 15 and 18 had attitudes that indicated or could lead to an eating disorder.

At Al Ain University, research discovered that 1.8 per cent of 900 girls between the ages of 13 and 19 were anorexic.

A similar study of British girls aged between 16 and 18 found that only 1 per cent had the condition.

In the United States, the National Institute of Mental Health claims that as many as one in five women around the world struggles with an eating disorder.

Dr Kanafani said the most common risk factor in the UAE was

psychological issues were also often to blame.

"Appearance-obsessed individuals make it more difficult for a person to avoid the pressure of losing weight," she said.

"Individuals who are bullied and picked on due to their weight or body shape are also at a higher risk of developing an eating disorder.

"In addition to these risk factors, there are social and psychological factors that affect the development of eating disorders,"

In Abu Dhabi, the American Centre for Psychiatry and Neurology admits an average of two new patients with eating disorders each week.

The most common mental health disorders related to weight are anorexia and bulimia, and both sexes suffer from them.

Anorexia nervosa involves the restriction of food intake, leading to less than 85 per cent of body weight with regards to age, sex, developmental trajectory and physical health. It also involves an intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat.

With anorexia, a person achieves weight loss through dieting, fasting or excessive exercise. Bulimia involves starvation, bingeing and purging.

The idea of control is one of the most important psychological factors surrounding eating

fani. "Individuals prone to anorexia have either had the sense of control taken from them or are limited in the amount of control they have on their life," she said.

"People in overprotective families or those who are physically or sexually abused tend to resort to regaining control through eating habits."

Sixteen-year-old Dubai schoolgirl Sara, not her real name, has been struggling with anorexia since she was 14.

"I always had low self-esteem and began to have issues with food and began dieting two years ago," she said.

"At my heaviest I weighed 54kg, and at my lightest I was 47kg. My diet was just watermelon and jello. Other than that I would not eat at all. I would avoid carbs and anything with lots of calories."

Sara initially started dieting and then did not eat because she was busy with her friends and sports. She lost weight, which made her feel so good that she wanted to continue. She still suffers from anorexia but is receiving therapy from a psychologist.

"It has damaged my relationship between my family and I because they started to think that I am an angry, tired, bitter and isolated person," said Sara.

She stopped playing sports and socialising with her friends to avoid dining with them.

"Some of my friends, who were also anorexic, were proud of me and encouraged me," she said.

"I would also fight with my family to [be able to] walk away and go to my room to avoid eating.



Dr Thoraiya Kanafani, a clinical psychologist at HRIC in Dubai. Reem Mohammed / The National

have reached a healthy weight and I'm now looking to maintain it while reducing the obsessive thinking."

Help can be offered to people with eating disorders by increasing an individual's sense of worth through praise, encouragement and support.

Doctors stress the importance

"good" and "bad" food and the truth about health and the physical consequences of eating disorders.

Gynaecologists have warned of the effect that eating disorders can have on fertility.

Dr Naglaa Rizk, a consultant gynaecologist at Al Zahra Hospital in Dubai, said that eating

young women who wished to start a family.

"It will decrease their reproductive stability and their ability to ovulate properly," she said. "Decreasing fat in young girls will often cause them to stop having regular periods. Their whole reproductive tract goes off kilter."