

Disordered Eating and Domestic Abuse: Data for New Directions

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Overview & Selected Findings

Domestic abuse and disordered eating (DE) are now recognized as major problems confronting the Jewish community. Yet, there is a dearth of empirical data, leaving many crucial questions unanswered:

- What proportion of women have serious eating problems?
 - Are there some groups at high risk than others?
- What proportion have been abused?
 - Does abuse occur more frequently in childhood or adulthood?
 - What proportion of women experience abuse in both time periods?
- How are disordered eating and abuse connected?
 - What proportion of women with serious DE have been abused?
 - Are there differences according to religious observance traditions?
- Which women use services and how do they evaluate the services they receive?

A recent community study of more than 500 Jewish women in Israel documents the frequency of DE and the frequency of abuse at multiple time periods. It also contains detailed information about types of abuse: sexual, physical, emotional. Moreover, the findings shed light on the very important issue of the relationship between DE and abuse. Some of the study's highlights are:

- Disordered eating behaviors are widespread, affecting n 15% of all respondents. This is both unexpected and alarming, especially in view of the fact that respondents are adult women ages 25-65+.
- One of the most profoundly disturbing findings reveals that more than half of all respondents admitted they had been abused (56%): 46% were abused in childhood; 38% reported abuse in the previous year.
- 27% reported physical abuse; 7% sexual abuse; 53% emotional abuse.

- Concerning the DE-abuse relationship: among women with serious eating problems, 67% reported abuse. Documenting this strong and statistically significant relationship is a major accomplishment of this study.
- The vast majority of women with serious eating problems (65%) do not utilize any professional services including primary care physicians, dieticians or mental health therapists.
- An important and related finding is that more than half the women with no prior mental health treatment said they would be 'very likely' to go to a therapist if recommended by their family doctor.

The rich and detailed findings from this large community sample of Jewish women provide a unique opportunity to design treatment practices and prevention policies responsive to specific needs of women at highest risk. Indeed, the policy and planning implications of these findings are enormous and stunning. At the very least, they provide irrefutable evidence of the extent of serious eating problems and the association with violence and abuse both in childhood and adulthood. They represent a golden opportunity to address long-neglected health and social justice issues that cause immense suffering and to women and their families in the Jewish community worldwide.

Additional findings according to religious observance traditions – Orthodox, Ultra-Orthodox, Traditional and Secular – will be presented at the Conference on June 7, 2009. For more information or to schedule a workshop designed specifically to address your organization's needs, please contact Dr. Marjorie Feinson, mcfnew@gmail.com.

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