

Support for Moms with Eating Disorders

An offer of hope from Jennifer Lombardi MFT



Jennifer Lombardi, executive director of Summit Eating Disorders and a mother of two.

Jennifer Lombardi has been in recovery from an eating disorder for more than 19 years. Now, she successfully uses her insight and compassion to help others through her role as executive director of Summit Eating Disorders, based in Sacramento (www.sedop.org).

Combining pregnancy and motherhood with an eating disorder can be very challenging.

"I think first and foremost, for a person struggling with an eating disorder who becomes pregnant, it can trigger all kinds of concerns for that person," says Lombardi, a mom to two young children. "She is naturally going to need to gain

weight in order to support the pregnancy, and it is also going to be a life-altering event."

She adds that as a society, we can view life changes in a "Pollyanna-ish" way.

"We tend to look at how wonderful things can be and that's absolutely true, but they often times come with a tremendous amount of stress," says Lombardi. "With an eating disorder, those stresses can be magnified."

Older children are put at risk as well, and not just from a nutritional and medical standpoint. A mother with an eating disorder may think her child is unaware of her problem, but that's not the case.

"The child will say, 'mommy doesn't eat dinner with me ever' or 'mommy's always exercising.' Children are very perceptive. They know something is not right and it's scary for them," Lombardi says.

Eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any mental illness, and it's important to know that recovering from an eating disorder works best when the family is involved.

"It's not the kind of illness that someone recovers from in a vacuum," Lombardi says.

How to Help a Loved One

If you have a friend or loved one who you suspect is struggling with an eating

disorder, Lombardi suggests you first write down very clearly what the concerns are. Is there use of laxatives? Is there excessive exercising? Does she disappear to the bathroom after every meal?

Lombardi says to make another list about why certain behaviors scare you and then, if possible, sit with that person one-on-one and let her know what you are seeing and why it concerns you. Being very clear is key. She also suggests making the time "sacred" with no distractions.

"The person struggling may or may not acknowledge [the issue]," says Lombardi. "She may be angry, cry or make all kinds of promises about how she is going to be different. At that point, you say 'at the very least, please have an assessment done by someone who is truly qualified in eating disorders.'"

A thorough assessment will consist of checking vital signs, lab work and an in-depth interview.

"You're not asking her to commit to treatment," says Lombardi. "You're asking her to please have a thorough assessment, and then she gets to decide at that point. One step at a time."

In her experience, Lombardi has found that once the person feels safe

Resources

Eating Disorders Coalition

Research, policy and action
www.eatingdisorderscoalition.org

The National Eating Disorders Association

www.nationaleatingdisorders.org

Eating Disorders Review

Latest clinical research
www.eatingdisordersreview.com

Orthorexia Nervosa

Article and questionnaire
www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/orthorexia-nervosa



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they tend to be fairly honest about their behavior. Again, educating loved ones and creating an ongoing support system is vital.

Lombardi is also getting the word out on a relatively new disorder called “orthorexia” (literally, “righteous eating”). The disorder begins when someone genuinely wants to improve her health by eating clean and pure foods, but eventually her life becomes very isolated and limited. By obsessing over food choices, her nutritional intake suffers, and her mental state and relationships are negatively affected.

The recent multitude of books and documentaries about food production and diet have brought many critical issues to the family dinner table. Subsequent changes for a healthier lifestyle are to be commended, but any overpowering drive to live by extreme standards needs attention. (Learn more at www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/orthorexia-nervosa.) The good news is that orthorexia can be treated with methods similar to those used to treat other eating disorders.

Summit Eating Disorders is praised for taking the body-mind-spirit connection into their healing approach. Lombardi speaks more specifically on the spiritual aspect of healing, knowing how important it is for people to look down the road when their eating disorders will no longer be a part of their lives.

“They need to have hope. Not just that they can heal from behaviors, but they can have a better life outside of an eating disorder,” Lombardi says. “When you are in the thick of an eating disorder, it’s very hard to imagine having a life without it. It’s understandable why they would be questioning, ‘I’ll live with this for the rest of my life. I don’t think I can cope with life without it’. I know firsthand how lonely and isolating the illness can be. Truthfully, I would have been skeptical in the midst of my illness if people had said that to me, but it’s true. There is life beyond a eating disorder that’s far more enriching.” ❖

Laura Pardo writes from central San Diego.