

Families do not cause anorexia nervosa

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Misstatements and ignorance claiming that families "cause" eating disorders is like blaming parents for diabetes or asthma or cancer says an international group of eating disorders researchers.

Recent damaging statements by fashion model Gisele Bundchen stating that unsupportive families cause anorexia nervosa only perpetuate misconceptions and further stigmatize eating disorders. Contrary to her claim, there is no scientific evidence that families cause anorexia nervosa. In fact, the researchers are finding that anorexia nervosa is far more complex than simply wanting to be slim to achieve some fashionable slender ideal. The data show that anorexia nervosa has a strong genetic component that may be the root cause of this illness.

"An uninformed opinion such as Bundchen's causes harm on a number of levels. By contributing to the stigma, it drives sufferers underground and creates obstacles to seeking help. It damages attempts at advocacy and hurts parents who are desperately fighting for their child's recovery," said Allan S. Kaplan, M.D., Loretta Anne Rogers Chair in Eating Disorders at the University of Toronto. "Such thinking also misinforms third party payors who may not want to pay for the treatment of these biologically-based illnesses if they think its primary cause is family dysfunction."

Dr. Kaplan is a member of the international group of researchers attempting to find which genes contribute to anorexia nervosa through a National Institute of Mental Health-funded study of families with a history of anorexia nervosa. The current study, which is being conducted

at 10 sites across the world, hopes to further clarify which genes play a role in anorexia nervosa. The study builds on data from ten years of groundbreaking research on the genetics of eating disorders sponsored by the Price Foundation.

"We often hear that societal pressures to be thin cause many young women and men to develop an eating disorder. Many individuals in our culture, for a number of reasons, are concerned with their weight and diet. Yet less than half of 1 percent of all women develop anorexia nervosa, which indicates to us that societal pressure alone isn't enough to cause someone to develop this disease," said Walter H. Kaye, M.D., professor of psychiatry, University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine. "Our research has found that genes seem to play a substantial role in determining who is vulnerable to developing an eating disorder. However, the societal pressure isn't irrelevant; it may be the environmental trigger that releases a person's genetic risk." Families should not be blamed for causing anorexia. In fact, they are often devastated and suffer from the consequences of this illness."

Anorexia nervosa is a serious and potentially lethal illness, with a mortality rate greater than 10 percent. It is characterized by the relentless pursuit of thinness, emaciation and the obsessive fear of gaining weight. Anorexia nervosa commonly begins during adolescence, but strikes throughout the lifespan--it is nine times more common in females than in males. Personality traits, such as perfectionism, anxiety and obsessionality, are often present in childhood before the eating disorder develops and may contribute to the risk of developing this disorder.

"We need to understand all the factors that influence eating disorders, both genetic and environmental, and find ways to address them in order to prevent people from developing these potentially deadly conditions," said Cynthia Bulik, Ph.D., William and Jeanne Jordan Distinguished Professor of Eating Disorders, University of North Carolina at Chapel

Hill. "Understanding how genes and environment interact both to increase risk for eating disorders and to protect those who are genetically vulnerable from developing the disorder will require the cooperation of professionals in the eating disorders field, the media, and the fashion and entertainment industries. Only cooperatively, will we be able to move the field forward toward the elimination of this disease."

"Anorexia nervosa has the highest death rate of any mental illness, yet so few dollars are dedicated to the cure," stated Lynn Grefe, CEO of the National Eating Disorders Association. "These scientific advances demonstrating a genetic component are significant and so meaningful to our families, wiping away the myths and emphasizing the need for even more research to help the next generation."

Source: University of Pittsburgh Medical Center

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