

Research examines college students' knowledge about eating disorders

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They're the prime demographic for developing eating disorders, yet new research out of the University of Cincinnati suggests that it could be difficult for college students to notice the warning signs. On Oct. 31, Ashlee Hoffman, a UC doctoral student in health promotion and education, will present her research, titled, "University Students' Knowledge of An Ability to Identify Disordered Eating, Warning Signs and Risk Factors," at the American Public Health Association's 139th annual meeting and exposition in Washington, DC.

Disordered eating, Hoffman explains, involves [unhealthy habits](#) over time that can lead up to, but may not yet fit the medical diagnoses of an eating disorder such as [anorexia](#) or bulimia.

Hoffman's poster research presentation is based on her survey of 428 college students. The survey examined whether they could differentiate between the myths and facts surrounding disordered eating, as well as the risk factors and [warning signs](#).

The survey also revealed that one out of four survey participants reported "lifetime involvement in disordered eating," and that 50 percent of the participants knew someone who had an eating disorder.

Hoffman says the majority of the [study participants](#) could identify the most common risk factors associated with disordered eating, such as depression and anxiety. However, the students who reported longtime disordered eating were the most unlikely group – among males, females,

freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors – to correctly identify risk factors.

The study also found that only a moderate percentage of the students surveyed could identify other risk factors that could trigger disordered eating, such as a recent life change, a critical family member or involvement in a sport that emphasizes being lean.

Females were significantly more likely than males to know risk factors as well as warning signs of disordered eating, such as abnormal weight loss, purging and distorted body image.

Hoffman's survey also found that college freshmen and sophomores were more familiar with the primary [risk factors](#) than upperclassmen and graduate students.

Figures from the National Institute of Mental Health in 2004 found that eating disorders affected 24 million Americans – with the majority of sufferers between the ages of 12 and 25. "[Eating disorders](#) hold the highest death rate out of any mental illness affecting this age group, with a large number of cases ending in suicide," Hoffman says. "The survey also found that some students mistakenly believe disordered eating is a vanity issue, when in fact, it is a compulsive, addictive behavior that sufferers can use as a coping mechanism for stress."

Hoffman says that her future research will explore how to better educate college-age students about identifying disordered eating, as well as how to open the doors of communication with friends who they suspect might be struggling with disordered eating. "It's an issue that's been long perceived as a taboo subject, partly because of the efforts that people make in hiding disordered eating," Hoffman says. "If it's not appropriately addressed in conversation, it can make the problem even worse."

Secondary researchers on the study were Keith King, UC professor of [health promotion](#) and education, and Rebecca Vidourek, UC assistant professor of human services.

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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