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## Raising Awareness about Eating Disorders

Developing a positive body image is key in preventing some eating disorders. It is important to know that many people are affected by it and some suffer in silence. Early intervention is important for recovery, and the aim of this article is to raise awareness, not provide treatment.

According to the Mayo Clinic, "The most common eating disorders are anorexia, bulimia, and binge-eating disorder. Most eating disorders involve an excessive focus on weight, body shape, and food, leading to dangerous eating behaviors that can impact nutritional intake." Issues around food and body image can disrupt daily life, impairing daily functioning.

This article is dedicated to the memory of Maria, who struggled with bulimia. Despite our close relationship, her suffering went unnoticed. Eating disorders affect about 10% of the US population. They can be fatal, exacerbate other health problems, and increase the risk of suicide. However, clinical treatments can be effective. The road to recovery can be challenging due to denial and stigma.

To clarify concepts and promote productive conversations about eating disorders, here is a true or false quiz:

1. Eating disorders are medical illnesses like diabetes.
  - True. Eating disorders are serious medical conditions.
2. Eating disorders are biologically influenced and have a genetic component.
  - True. While genes play a role, they don't predict who will develop an eating disorder. Overcoming it involves addressing biological functions, such as chemical imbalances in the brain, requiring experts like registered dietitians, medical doctors, and psychotherapists.
3. Eating disorders can affect anyone.
  - True. They don't discriminate based on race, age, ethnicity, or gender. Men may not recognize symptoms due to stereotypes, leading to more severe cases when seeking healthcare.
4. You can tell someone has an eating disorder by looking at them.
  - False. People with eating disorders can be of any weight—underweight, normal weight, or overweight. Fewer than 6% are medically diagnosed as "underweight."
5. Family members can be a patient's best ally in treatment.
  - True. Eating disorders are caused by a combination of factors, and family members do not cause them but can provide crucial support.

The way we talk about eating disorders matters. Knowing the facts can help shape the conversation positively.

Questions to consider: Do I or my loved one have an eating disorder? How do I identify an eating disorder? Let's define the most common types.

### Common Types of Eating Disorders:

- Anorexia Nervosa: People avoid food, severely restrict intake, or eat very small quantities. Even when dangerously underweight, they may see themselves as overweight. Treatment involves addressing ambivalence, intense fear of weight gain, and biological imbalances.
- Bulimia Nervosa: Recurrent episodes of eating large amounts followed by compensatory behaviors like forced vomiting. Characterized by high impulsivity.
- Binge-eating disorder: Loss of control over eating without purging, often leading to overweight or obesity.

Detection is sensitive but crucial for early intervention. Licensed healthcare providers should make diagnoses.

### Emotional/Behavioral Signs:

- Weight loss, dieting, and food control.
- Food rituals causing anxiety.
- Social withdrawal, frequent dieting, body checking, extreme mood swings.
- Regular retreats to the bathroom after meals.

### Physical Signs:

- Noticeable weight fluctuations, gastrointestinal complaints.
- Dizziness, difficulty concentrating, sleeping.
- Issues with dental, skin, hair, and nail health.

Eating disorders deserve immediate attention, and everyone plays a role in raising awareness and supporting those in need. Valuable prevention resources include:

- National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA)
  - Website: [National Eating Disorders Association](https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org)
  - Helpline: 1-800-931-2237
- ANAD (National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders)
  - Website: [ANAD](https://www.anad.org)
  - Helpline: 630-577-1330
- Rutgers University – Body Image Program
  - Website: [Rutgers Body Image Program](https://www.rutgers.edu/body-image-program)

By working together, a significant difference can be made in the fight against eating disorders.