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THE QUESTIONS EVERY PARENT ASKS:

Why My Child? What Did I Do Wrong?

Laney's Story:

All her friends were dieting, and they're okay—
why did our daughter get an eating disorder?

Laney's mother made an appointment at my clinic because she suspected something wasn't right with her 14-year-old year old daughter. A very social and active girl, Laney always got good grades and was enjoying her freshman year in high school. But her mother was concerned about her constant dieting. She told me it started when Laney and her two best friends decided to try out for the cheerleading squad and wanted to lose weight to be more competitive. They cut out "junk" food and began walking around the track instead of eating lunch. Initially, they all lost some weight.

Laney's friends and family told her she looked great; her mother praised her for eating healthy food and having so much willpower. After the tryouts, Laney's friends began to add chips and pizza back into their diets and eventually stopped their lunchtime walks. But Laney began to restrict her diet more. She significantly cut down on breads and cereals and became a vegetarian. She also changed her lunchtime walks into lunchtime runs.

Her parents began to worry: she was looking pale and gaunt and began withdrawing from her friends. Always a cheerful and happy child, Laney seemed very moody. Although she still excelled at school, she seemed to have lost her joie de vivre.

When Laney came into my office, she was thin and pallid. Her hands and feet were cold and her heart rate was very low. When I explained to her parents that she needed to be admitted to the hospital because of a weakened heart, they couldn't understand why this happened to Laney. Why had her "diet" gotten out of control while her friends' did not? What did they do wrong? Shouldn't they have noticed sooner that things were going wrong? How could they have praised her for losing weight when she was going down such a dangerous path? How did this happen?

Why my child? This is generally the first question most parents ask me when their child is diagnosed with an eating disorder. Their second question is usually, "What did I do wrong?" Your child's eating disorder most likely developed because of a complicated combination of factors and is not anyone's fault: it is not your fault or your child's fault. Recognizing that your child has a serious problem is the first step; it's time to stop looking back and trying to second-guess yourself; it's more important to begin looking forward and focus on how to help your child fight her eating disorder. As the mother of one of my patients told me, "The more I stopped feeling guilty about causing my daughter's eating disorder, the more I was able to move forward and focus on her recovery." The best way to move ahead is to learn as much as possible about your child's disease.

Most eating disorders start as ordinary diets—a teenage boy wants to get in shape for cross-country or a girl wants to buy a bikini for spring break. But at some undefined point, the child stops controlling the diet and the diet takes control of the child. One parent described it as "alien force taking charge of my child's eating." It is almost impossible to pinpoint when a diet shifts into an eating disorder, which makes it difficult for parents to recognize.

Parents often tell me they suspected something was "different" with their child but it was such a subtle, gradual change it was difficult to define. "Ellen's mood swings were so tricky—I figured she was hormonal or anxious about starting high school," one mother told me. "I talked to my friends who also said their daughters were unpredictable. But their kids didn't get an eating disorder—why Ellen? I keep trying to figure out what I could have done differently." If you're feeling like Ellen's mother, you're

not alone. Many parents feel responsible for their children's eating disorders. I can't emphasize enough that you are not to blame for your child's disease. You'll need all of your energy to help your child beat her eating disorder and letting go of your personal blame is a good way to start.

In working with parents, I've found that it helps to understand why some children are at higher risk for developing an eating disorder. Despite considerable research in this area, the cause of eating disorders is still unknown. However, what we do know is that developing an eating disorder is influenced by a combination of factors: psychological, developmental, social, cultural, genetic, and neurochemical (brain chemistry). Just one of these factors alone will not cause an eating disorder, but a combination of these elements can increase the possibility of developing one. Often, the lines between these different factors blur: for instance, personality traits are psychological as well as genetic; cultural influences and social pressure often overlap.

The following offers a brief summary of the major risk factors for the development of an eating disorder. If you would like more in-depth information, appendix C lists books specifically written about these complex topics and appendix A and B list links to the most reliable Web sites focusing on eating disorders.