

West County Psychological Associates

The WCPA News

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The Effects of the 'Net: Multi-tasking, Brain Change, and Attention Span in the Technological Age Amy V. Maus, MSW, LCSW

Doctors today hear certain increasingly common concerns from their patients. Some patients come wondering about Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). They report feeling a constant lack of focus, a diminished ability to read at length, and the subjective feeling that they are constantly running in so many directions, but not getting much done. Others cite their frequently lost phone or car keys, difficulty staying focused on daily tasks and an increased reliance on to-do notes and reminder apps as they ponder, sometimes with real alarm, if they might be experiencing early-onset Alzheimer's disease. What many, if not most, of these worried patients have in common is neither ADHD nor dementia. Their brains, and therefore their behavior, have instead been changed by their constant internet use.

A generation ago, few experts would have believed that the internet would have the power to change our brains in such a short time span. Traditional thought in the neurology field held that adult brains were essentially fixed; other than adding new memories, the brain's structure and functions mostly remained stable. Now we know that the brain is not only changeable at all ages, a concept called "plasticity," but it is super-changeable. Our daily experiences leave lasting changes within the physical structure, and therefore function, of our brains.

Neural plasticity accounts for the increased hearing abilities of those who lose their vision, through the rededicating of neurons in the visual cortex toward use for auditory processing. Medical researchers are beginning to show how "phantom limb" experiences in amputees are an effect of neural plasticity, as neural connections once dedicated to now-lost bodily areas are usurped by circuits registering other areas. Modern brain imaging technologies have contributed to fascinating research showing that only a few repetitions of a novel experience create real and measurable brain change.

Behaviors and experiences that are repeated and skills that are regularly used create deeper, stronger neural circuits in the brain, much as a well-used footpath through foliage stays clear. The circuits of skills and behaviors that are abandoned or utilized infrequently can diminish or deteriorate with neglect. "Cells that fire together, wire together," is a commonly mentioned phrase in neuroplasticity research, meaning that brain circuits that are used become stronger. These become the paths of least resistance, so to speak, in our brains. Our go-to habits.

It's important to note that *plastic* does not mean the same thing as *elastic*. Once our brains are changed, they do not easily "bounce back" to their previous state, like a rubber band after being stretched. When we fail to engage a skill or practice a behavior, the brain space for that proficiency deteriorates. Though it doesn't fully disappear, it is taken over by skills, thoughts, and experiences that we are using more frequently. Some of the original neural paths and connections remain, making it easier to re-learn an old skill than it was to learn it in the first place. However, our brain focuses its energies and strongest synaptic connections on our current behaviors.

How then, does the internet change the brains of its frequent users? Today, most adolescents and adults spend hours each day online, texting, tweeting, shopping, messaging, surfing, and checking social media. The old days, when we spent time online and time offline, are essentially gone by, as today we live constantly "connected." The medium of the internet encourages scanning,

skimming, and brief, superficial reading. Research has shown that, when we view a webpage, our eyes take a track similar to the letter “F.” We read across a line or two, skip down, glance across a line or two, and repeat. Linear reading – top to bottom, left to right – isn’t compatible with web use. Our brains are learning to power-browse rather than read fully.

Social science research has shown that we retain less of what we read and learn online than what we read and learn offline. Research subjects consistently perform better on measures of comprehension and learning when information is presented the old fashioned way, primarily through printed text, than when gleaned from an internet source that includes links, advertisements, videos, and other visual distractions. We are trading the skills of our old brains – calm, linear thought, immersive reading and contemplation – for the internet brain that wants to click, move, scan, jump, and move again.

In addition to brain changes due to plasticity, we also tend to multi-task when online, which divides attention. Gone are the days of one open page or one running app. Often six, eight or ten tabs are open online, representing work or academic tasks, social media, news, favorite blogs, games, and chats that simultaneously seek the attention of their user. Email accounts are often set to check for new messages every two or five minutes, representing yet another interruption with each new arrival.

Attention is a limited resource. Though many people believe that they multi-task well, science is clear that they are simply wrong. When individuals believe they are multi-tasking, they are actually rapidly switching their attentional focus from one issue to another. When we divide our attention in rapid succession, rather than focusing on one, important issue, we learn less, remember less, and achieve less. We have a powerful – but inaccurate – belief that we have accomplished more when in reality we have done the opposite.

These modern habits of extreme multi-tasking, skimming, browsing, and quickly following new links are now affecting our behavior even when we aren’t online, because our brains, through plasticity, have become accustomed to, *and good at*, those habits. Multi-tasking is the new deep path circuit in our brains; power-skimming is the path of least resistance. Deep reading, contemplation, full concentration (and their slow emotional counterparts, empathy and compassion), are the lesser-used, diminishing skills. Of course, ask any experienced school teacher, and he or she will share that today’s diminished attention, concentration, reading and memory skills are not limited to adults.

Using better habits with our technology will not be easy. Our brains are now trained to scan, jump, skip and click. These are now our brains’ go-to habits. Yet purposefully choosing better practices will, in a relatively short time, help us to feel more focused and productive. Knowing that complete disengagement from the internet is something that few individuals could or would choose today, what can a typical person do to reverse some of these recent brain changes?

- Read deeply. Engage with an old-fashioned, paper, turn-the-pages book. If you find that your brain wants to skip around, skip ahead, or leave the book and find a new activity after only a few moments, resist that urge. Get back to the practice of reading. Turn off your cell phone and do not check email or texts during your reading time.
- Do not check for email messages or texts frequently. Instead, set certain times of day to intentionally check your messages and respond, and then re-close those programs and apps. Let your friends and work colleagues know of your newfound freedom from the fetters of constant message checking and reassure them that you will respond.
- Use only one screen at a time. It is so common today to tweet our favorite television show or text while working online. Resist the urge to multi-task, knowing its effects on your productivity. Avoid simultaneous use of multiple devices and close tabs after completing a task. Put your phone aside or turn it off completely while engaging in other activities.
- Use a meditative practice. Mindfulness, yoga, or meditative prayer allows you to focus on the here and now, and allows your mind time to either drift freely, without the frantic pace of links, sites and apps, or to focus fully and completely on the topic of your choice.
- Go outside, leaving all gadgets behind. Take a walk around the block or around your yard. Visit a park, hike a trail or simply sit on your back porch and take in the sights and sounds. Notice the leaves on the path and the bird on the branch. Exposure to nature is one of the most effective tools to improve memory, emotional composure, and sense of well-being.
- Live in the moment. Watch the play instead of tweeting it, take in the sunset without posting a pic to Instagram, have dinnertime with your family daily with no screens on and no checking allowed. Engage in face-to-face conversation without glancing at your phone. Experience your life “live” and make lasting memories through purposeful attention.

Our computing devices are more than tools of convenience and information, more than mere wasters of time and providers of ephemera. They are machines capable of quickly and profoundly changing our brains and behaviors, and as such we should use them thoughtfully and intentionally. Moreover, we are wise to have time without our gadgets on at all. Through the miracle of plasticity, when we intentionally make good choices with technology, we can re-train our brains how to think, focus and experience our world. Take a walk. See a play. Read a book.



Amy V. Maus, MSW, LCSW provides consultation and presentation services to faculties, parents, students and Care Teams, as well as in-office assessment services.

From the Director

Over the years, in thinking about topics for the From the Director article, I generally attempt to write about those issues that I personally believe are having an impact on us, as a society, be it parents, educators, care managers, lawyers, or doctors. I had a client recently tell me that he sees today as being the best of times and the worst of times. That struck a chord with me. If I allow myself to examine where I am today, I would agree with the client --- the best of times and the worst of times. There are days when I feel as though it is the worst of times. I listen to a woman who has so much loss in her life that I question whether I could possibly handle this amount of grief if I were she. Or there is the case of a young man who attempts to do what he considers to be the right things and experiences endless disappointments. He has lost all trust in himself and others. Or there is the young woman who feels an intense loneliness this holiday because she is estranged from both her parents. She knows that having a relationship with them would jeopardize her emotionally and physically. There are endless stories of unhappiness and even desolation.

Then I contrast this with opposite emotions. For example, being at a holiday party where I'm with relatives and friends that I really enjoy – they can make me laugh and create a sense in me that this is where I belong. We are all a part of each other. We have a history together and yet we still care about each other. Or hearing the exciting announcement on Christmas Eve that there will be a new baby in the family. Being absolutely delighted in seeing Christmas again through the eyes of a two and one half year old child who calls the family together after dinner by announcing loudly, "Hey, people, it's time to sing Christmas carols. Everybody come in the living room." And we all sing Santa Claus is Coming to Town watching how happy and thrilled he is that he's pulled us together and we're singing songs that he just learned in nursery school.

I find that as time goes on, the intensity of the emotions becomes stronger – both sadness and happiness. How do we reconcile such opposite feelings? I believe that what age has taught me is that these feelings are really what life is all about. The best of times lives side by side within us with the worst of times. We can go from sadness to joy within minutes and it is all very real. The question is, how do we process this so that we are able to flow from one situation to another? Years ago I read a book written by Eckhart Tolle entitled *The Power of Now*. Tolle tells us that the only way to live a healthy life is to be in the "now" or the present. He says that when we live primarily in the past, we open ourselves to depression. When we live in the future, we're susceptible to anxiety. It is only by living in the "now" that we are able to live life fully because it is only here that we can appreciate what we are experiencing. Thus, being present in the here and now, whether it is in our sorrow or in our joy, is the only way we can lead a full and enriching life. I believe that in this holiday season, I have been blessed knowing that I am experiencing both the best of times and the worst of times.

-Mary

SPRING SEMINAR OFFERING

The Spectrum of Compulsion:

OCD, Hair Pulling, Skin Picking, Hoarding and Body Dysmorphic Disorder in Students and Effective School Responses
*A Seminar for School Professionals**

Wednesday, February 24, 2016 1:00 to 3:00 p.m. Fee \$45 *Continuing Education certificate provided*

Topics Covered Include:

- Familiarization of causes, signs and symptoms of each of the disorders listed above
- Discussion of techniques to handle students with obsession and compulsion-related disorders
- Explanation of treatment techniques that therapists use and how school personnel can support

Presenter: Diane M. Prost, M.Ed., NCC, LPC

Location: West County Psychological Associates 12125 Woodcrest Executive Drive, St. Louis, MO 63141

TO REGISTER: Go to <http://conta.cc/1YOIDV1> and follow the steps provided.

Payment expected at time of registration.

*** This presentation is also available for faculty groups at your site. Call for information.**

West County Psychological Associates

Services Available through the **Moving Families Forward Program**

West County Psychological Associates offers many services through our Moving Families Forward program. These services assist all family members in reaching a peaceful resolution when struggling with challenging family transitions.

Premarital, Couples, Marriage and Family

Therapy: New family structures mean new roles for everyone in the family. Therapists can assist families in coming together, welcoming new roles and relationships into the family, and working on goals as defined by the couple or family.

Divorce Mediation: A certified mediator can assist couples in reaching a peaceful and amicable divorce resolution. This process allows mediators to act as a neutral third party, assisting in the division of property, parenting plans, child support and any other relevant issues in the divorce. Financially, it is better to mediate than litigate.

Divorce Coaching: Divorce is an emotional process and having a coach can make a tremendous difference in surviving the process. Coaching can assist individuals in understanding the process and assist with their grief or resistance to negotiations. The goal is to provide support to the individual while also helping to prepare them for a future as a single adult. This process may continue after the divorce proceedings have ended, assisting adults in settling into their new roles.

Child Custody Mediation:

Mediation is a confidential process designed to offer parents the ability to design a workable and age-appropriate parenting plan for children. Ideal for parents who want to have professional direction to create a plan that works for their family without the "typical" visitation schedule.

Parent Coordination: Dispute resolution for high conflict parents. This service assists parents in high conflict situations to establish and maintain a healthier relationship by reducing the amount of parental conflict and the risk factors that influence a child's post-divorce/separation adjustment.

Co-Parent

Counseling: Parents are often overwhelmed by the amount of decisions they are now making to ensure their child's healthy adjustment during this trying time. Co-parent counseling is a confidential therapeutic service that addresses the co-parenting relationship and children's issues associated with divorce and family separation. Learn how children experience family separation as well as communication and negotiation skills to improve your skills in being a co-parent.

Custody Evaluations:

Our experienced staff provides full and partial custody evaluations for families in conflict with issues of custody. We will work with families, attorneys and other professionals to establish the best custody outcome for children and families.

Parent Child Reunification:

A parent can sometimes lose touch with a child for a variety of reasons. In a safe setting, a child can be reintroduced to a relationship with their parent. The child and parent can effectively explore and begin to develop a healthy relationship, repair attachment issues, and enhance their overall relationship.



Call Jennifer Van Luven
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***Available at Your School Site ~ Call Today to Schedule Your Preferred Date!
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A unique evening of self-discovery, relationship-building, and FUN!



The Mother/Daughter Dressing Debate:

A mother/daughter session on navigating this difficult issue

**Mothers and daughters leave
EMPOWERED and ENLIGHTENED!**

Moms, isn't this what we face? A daughter comes down the stairs in an outfit we know we are not letting her leave the house in... We say, "No way!" and all chaos breaks loose! Or, we say nothing at all and regret allowing her to dress that way, wishing we knew the right words to use. We are not alone! This is a HOT topic that many families struggle with today. In this session, mothers and daughters learn ways to help navigate this difficult time with break out groups led by Paula Collins from Your Closet's Best Friend and Tina Murphy, M.A., LPC, therapist at West County Psychological Associates. Join us for an evening of fashion, fun and facts.

Paula will help guide the youth in making the best fashion choices that fit their own personal style through:

- Group brainstorm on struggles, thoughts and pressure on how you're expected to look.
- Tips and techniques for dressing with focus on good choices for your body and image.
- Smart basics to have in your wardrobe, fun pieces to play with while respecting your values, body, budget and lifestyle.

Tina will discuss with the moms the science behind "why" teens want to dress the way they do:

- Common developmental issues, fashion and the brain at this age.
- Typical pushbacks and power struggles that happen while dressing.
- What to say and how to discuss the issue without taking things personally.
- Leave with real solutions!

Presenters:

Paula Collins, the stylist from Your Closet's Best Friend has over 26 years in the fashion industry. Paula has monthly featured style segments on KMOV Great Day St. Louis, a fashion blog, and does many speaking engagements. Her honest and effective approach has helped countless women and girls have wardrobes that not only reflect their best self, it respects their budget, lifestyle, and body type.



Tina Murphy, MA, LPC is a professional and school counselor with over 15 years' experience of working with children, adolescents and families in the metro area. Tina specializes in helping children, adolescents and their parents through developmental milestones, social skill issues, building self-confidence and strengthening family and peer relationships. She consults with many area schools and has given numerous parent presentations in the area on relevant issues pertaining to our youth today.

YOU ARE WORTH MORE THAN YOUR 'LIKES': TEENS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Cari McKnight, MSW, LCSW

“People are loving this one, I have 179 ‘likes’ so far!”... “OMG, this is embarrassing - I am going to delete this pic because I’ve only gotten 15 ‘likes’ in the last hour!”... “Cool, I had 30 people retweet me!” If you are ever hanging out with a group of teens, these are some of the comments you are very likely to hear at some point. If teens aren’t checking their phones to see what is happening on social media, very often, they are talking about it. Adolescents are spending huge amounts of time trying to take the perfect selfie to post on Instagram or come up with a clever comment to post on Twitter, all to put themselves out there in a way that will attract large numbers of “likes.” All of the social networks today measure, at least to some extent, the level of popularity, or reach, that our posts have. Likes, comments, “favorites,” retweets, etc. all provide a gauge – a gauge that our adolescents are using to define their very worth.

Over the past several years, social media use has exploded among teens. Professionals are starting to study this cultural phenomenon and the findings are disturbing. According to a recent study of 13 year olds, youth are excessively concerned with monitoring their popularity online and want to defend that popularity to anyone who challenges it. The study found that 61% of teens said they are online to make sure that their posts are getting likes and comments. 36% of teens report that they are online because they want to see if their friends are doing things without them, as there is a huge fear of missing out with this age group. 21% of teens state that they are online because they want to make sure that no one is saying mean things about them, and want to retaliate if they have. These statistics make it clear that youth, who are already in a life phase in which they tend to be overly concerned about their acceptance, are using social media to measure their popularity.

Many adolescents today are basing their overall sense of self-worth on reactions from the peers in their online network – many of whom they may never have met. To teens with an already fragile impression of themselves, this is dangerous. Anytime we look to an external source to provide and define our self-worth, we also give that source the power to take it away. Because kids are growing up immersed online from such a young age, and because there is so much power attached to the opinions on social media networks, teens are left with shaky self-images that are contingent on whether someone clicks a like button or not.

Teens are also personalizing the likes they get or don’t get. If someone doesn’t like their post, they can start to wonder what they did wrong or start to think that that person doesn’t like them anymore. If they do get the likes, they are getting a temporary high. Some youth are so dependent on this perceived approval from others that they begin acting like a desperate drug addict – checking their social media over 100 times per day, looking for a quick hit that provides a temporary euphoria. Some teens are even going so far as to literally purchase their likes and followers – as there are now ways to “pad your numbers” if you spend some money to do so. Adolescents are reporting that this quest for the all-important like is becoming a neurotic impulse, sucking the joy and happiness out of their lives. One high school girl is quoted as saying, “I don’t know why I need them. I don’t want to need them. It seems illogical, but I just do. We all count the ‘likes’ we have, and continually compare them to someone else’s.”

Social media, in and of itself, is not innately bad. In fact, it can be a wonderful way for teens to share fun life events and stories. It can help people stay connected. Many teens use it for positive leadership and collaboration and it can be a vehicle to raise awareness about important topics. Schools and teachers even use social media sometimes to disseminate information. However, it is easy for kids to fall into several pitfalls of social media, and unfortunately, they can end up distressed, devalued, lonely, and even suffering long-term damage.

We’ve all heard the horror stories - the child who was bullied on social media and then committed suicide... the girl who Snapchatted a nude picture to her boyfriend and then he posted it for everyone to see... but what about the stories that aren’t grabbing the headlines? What about the kids who are struggling with teen depression or extreme loneliness because they have eroded their self-worth on social media? What about the teens who are truly addicted to the high of getting more likes and followers and are using social media like a drug? We somehow think that these things won’t happen to our child. We think



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received her Master of Social Work degree from the University of Iowa and is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker. She specializes in private therapy for couples, families and individuals dealing with relationship/interpersonal difficulties, and is passionate about helping others create happiness and balance in their lives.

that we have a good handle on what is going on with our teen, and we think we will protect them from these perils. But do we really know what is going on?

The truth is, many parents do not. According to recent studies, a staggering 94% of parents underestimate the negative activity going on in their teen's social media accounts. In fact, many teens have accounts that their parents don't know about, and even if the parents do know about the accounts, many parents aren't regularly looking at what is going on. Because of this, young teens are blazing their own online path, with little or no guidance, creating some real concerns.

As one example, teens are sharing inappropriate pictures, hoping for lots of likes or acceptance. It is scary to see twelve and thirteen year old girls taking pictures in their bras, or in sexual poses, or even worse, nude. In pursuit of more likes or followers, teens are upping the ante – posting a more seductive shot of themselves, tweeting something extreme for shock value, or oversharing something that they can't take back. Studies show that adolescents who overly engage in social media are more likely to become depressed, and there have been suicides related to social media. Teens today are constantly comparing their lives to others' and falling short. Adolescents are feeling that they are not measuring up or as popular as their peers if they can't make the huge numbers of likes or followers. They are learning that they are defined by their image, and this creates teens who are even more self-absorbed and appearance-focused than prior generations.

So what can we, as parents, do to help?

- We can get involved in our children's online lives. We can require that we have access to their user names and passwords (as part of the privilege of having a cell phone). Some parents install apps that allow them to monitor their teens' social media accounts from their own computer. Regardless of what you decide to do to monitor your children, just realize that you do need to be involved. Research shows that when parents are involved in kids' social media lives, the negative impacts are dramatically lessened. Youth need to be reminded that an adult is watching.
- Have regular conversations with our teens about how distorted the online experience can be. We remind them that social media accounts are often just a highlight reel of people's lives – not a full, real life. Teens tend to rely upon social media as a source of truth, as a barometer of whose lives are worthwhile and valuable and whose are not. A great way to start is to try asking what they think has been cropped or edited out of her friend's "perfect" picture, and why. This can lead to bigger questions like, "Do you think your friends are being real online? Are you? Does looking at social media affect your mood?" We have a responsibility to help them keep this in perspective so that they can recognize that everyone else's life is not really better than their life – though it may appear to be online.
- We need to have conversations about how the number of likes or followers that they have is actually meaningless in the real world. This is tough, because our culture is telling teens quite the opposite. We have to be very careful not to dismiss or minimize their feelings. Unfortunately, it is not going to be enough to just say to our kids, "Hey, trust me, you are worth more than your likes!" We must LIVE this with them over and over. We talk to our kids about what makes them a worthwhile, valuable person, and look for ways to point these things out on a daily basis. We show them this through our non-verbal messages, by giving them our time and attention. What teens ultimately want is to feel that they fit in somewhere and to know that they have an intimate connection to others. Genuine intimacy like this happens face to face, not behind a screen.
- Probably most importantly, adults can role model appropriate social media use for our youth. We can show the proper ways to handle conflicts – how to approach people and talk issues out (vs. posting our frustrations with others online). We can model for teens by what we post (and don't post). Real life interactions are more valuable than online interactions; sometimes cherished, private moments are best not shared on social media. If we are getting upset because we didn't get a lot of likes when we post something, we are teaching our kids to do the same. We should help them understand appropriate boundaries in the online world, and what those look like. If we don't teach them these things, where will they learn?

The connections that matter aren't the people who click like when we are selfie-ready, but those who hug us while we are tearstained and crying... not the followers who "favorite" our witty tweet, but the ones who look us in the eye and laugh with us as we make a joyful memory together. Let our children see that the most powerful connection can happen while someone sits with us in silence, loving us through our day-to-day lives – as this can speak louder than a thousand comments on Instagram.

Eating Disorder: A look at healthy eating, disordered eating and when to get help

By Dena Bubrick-Tranen, LCSW

For many people, the holiday season is time when family and friends come together to eat, bake and eat some more. While festive meals bring people together, they also leave many feeling guilty and thinking about food and their bodies more than usual. Gym membership and fitness equipment sales skyrocket in January, as people resolve to undo their holiday eating. It is often challenging to put holiday eating into perspective. What is normal or healthy eating and when has eating and one's relationship with food become disordered?

Normal eating is generally understood to be based on the body's natural hunger and satiety cues. In other words, eating when one is hungry and stopping when one feels full or satisfied. Healthy eating involves some thinking and planning, though it is maintained as one of many areas the mind focuses on. It can include occasional overeating, like when holiday cookies are still warm from the oven and when extended family come together to honor a tradition. It can also involve occasional undereating, like when one has had a series of feast-like meals and has a natural drop in appetite.

Another important hallmark of normal eating is that food/eating are not tied to one's body image. When eating becomes disordered, a belief often develops that one food or meal can quickly and significantly change one's body. Body image is essentially the combination of the picture in one's own mind of what one looks like combined with the physical and emotional experience of living in one's own body. Distorted eating, negative body image and fear of gaining weight are often early warning signs for low self-esteem and eventually a full-blown eating disorder.

Disordered eating and eating disorders exist on a continuum and often worsen over time if they go unnoticed or untreated. Studies indicate the average age for symptom onset is around 12-14 with the symptoms peaking around 18-21. There are many factors that make some people more vulnerable than others. These include social group, involvement in competitive sports, and of course, home environment.

Below are some suggestions for parents on how to encourage healthy, normal eating in children and adolescents:

- Create predictable routines around mealtimes. When possible, have the family eat together.
- Respect a child's boundaries, do not force a child to finish what is on his/her plate.
- Demonstrate through words and actions love and acceptance of your child. Avoid criticizing your child's body or appearance.
- Avoid giving your child body-focused nick-names such as "Skinny Minnie" or "Chubby Bunny."
- Be mindful of your language about your own body. Children and adolescents are keenly aware of when a parent is dieting or unhappy about his/her body. Understand that you are teaching your child how to talk to him/herself about weight, body and self-acceptance.

Disordered eating can start to develop in someone when he/she starts thinking more and more about food and his/her body. Sometimes this preoccupation develops as a result of a comment from a peer, family member or physician and sometimes it is related to societal pressures to obtain the "perfect" or ideal body.

Another sign that one's eating has become disordered is when food and eating shift from being about physical hunger to emotional distress. Healthy eating is flexible and can accommodate one's various moods, schedules and preferences, whereas disordered eating is inflexible and based on increasingly strict rules.

An eating disorder is usually diagnosed when the disordered eating and thinking about food and body become rigid, all-encompassing, beyond one's capacity to manage and dangerous to one's health. Participating in fad diets such as no-fat, gluten-free (when not medically necessary) and dieting in general can put people at greater risk for an eating disorder. Those who struggle with perfectionism are also at higher risk for developing an eating disorder as are those who have a family of disordered eating or an eating disorder.

Eating disorders are divided into three basic subtypes including anorexia, bulimia and binge-eating disorder. Below are common signs and symptoms associated with each disorder.

Signs of Anorexia:

- Extreme weight loss or thinness not explained by a medical problem and usually the result of aggressive food restriction
- Despite extreme thinness, people with anorexia usually believe they are overweight or fat and want to continue to lose weight.
- Obsessive thinking and worrying about calories and nutritional facts
- Spending many hours exercising to burn off calories and prevent weight gain
- Skipping meals
- Irritability
- Avoiding eating with others/social withdrawal
- Irregular periods, thinning hair, and constant exhaustion

Signs of Binge-Eating Disorder:

- Eating alone or in secret
- Eating large quantities of food in a specific amount of time
- Eating rapidly
- Frequent dieting or exercise with no apparent weight loss
- Hoarding food/large amounts of food that go missing at home
- Spending money that cannot be accounted for (to purchase binge foods)
- A feeling of being out of control around food/during a binge episode
- Depression/social withdrawal

Signs of Bulimia:

- Exercising excessively or using diet pills or laxatives
- Going to the bathroom immediately after meals
- Frequently commenting on being overly full
- Spending a lot of time in the bathroom
- A sore throat, bruised/red knuckles, discoloration of the teeth
- Hoarding food/large amounts of food that go missing at home

If you or someone you love are experiencing or demonstrating these symptoms, it is time to get help from a professional counselor, therapist or psychiatrist. Eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any mental health disorder. They are serious, debilitating and very emotionally painful for the person who suffers with them.

Eating disorders do not get better on their own. In fact, they get worse and more dangerous when untreated. If you would like more information on eating disorder, go to the National Eating Disorders Association's website at www.nationaleatingdisorders.org or call West County Psychological Associates at (314) 275-8599 for a consultation.



Dena Bubrick-Tranen, LCSW is a graduate of The George Warren Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis. She began her career as a clinical social worker at the Harvard-affiliated McLean Hospital in Belmont, MA. While at McLean she received advance training in Dialectical Behavior Therapy, Mentalization Based Treatment and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. She has extensive experience in diagnosing and treating personality disorders and trauma-related disorders. Dena believes in using evidence-based therapies and offers comprehensive assessment and treatment for a wide range of mental health disorders including depression, anxiety, PTSD, eating disorders and substance abuse. She is known for her direct and interactive approach to therapy. She believes change and growth are possible and sees family members and school staff as important allies in this process.

Staying Connected: How to Foster Sibling Relationships after Losing Your Parents

Amy Neu, MSW, LCSW

“I’m doing all of the work!” “I feel like I’m in this alone.” “I don’t know what I would do without my sister.” These are all common statements about relationships with siblings while caring for aging parents. Often, all three sentiments are expressed by the same person, at different times. Caring for our aging loved ones truly is a roller coaster, and the riders frequently change. Our siblings are the most consistent people with us throughout this time, whether we like it or not. But how do our relationships with adult siblings change after the deaths of our parents? Furthermore, how can we foster healthy sibling relationships once our parents are gone?

In many families, the roles that siblings played in childhood are carried into adulthood to some degree. For example, the oldest daughter may have been “The Responsible One” as a child, and she became the mother’s Power of Attorney later in life; the youngest may have been “The Carefree Baby,” and as an adult her opinions are not taken seriously by her family. These roles greatly affect our present relationships with siblings, as well as how we see ourselves within our families.

Often, our roles are not openly discussed with each other. Our positions within the family are silently understood, making our family dynamics even more difficult to talk over. After the deaths of parents, the decades of spoken and unspoken slights, jealousies, and resentments between siblings may accumulate and become volatile without the presence of our parental mediators encouraging (or demanding) us to work things out. We are left alone to either work things out or not.

In any case, our decisions on how to move forward with our siblings affect our well-being. In many families, after parents’ deaths, siblings find themselves drifting apart unintentionally. Their parents were the common driving force in the relationships and, without their presence, the sibling relationships diminish. In other families, the emotions following parents’ deaths seem insurmountable and siblings purposely choose to disconnect. However, even if we cut out siblings from our lives entirely, emotions remain. Rarely is there a clean cut from family. At some time or another, we will feel the absence and, in the back of our mind, wonder, “What if…” and “Is it too late?” This absence frequently brings the emotions of anger, sadness, grief, and pain with it.

Many other siblings wish to continue or begin a healthy relationship with their siblings following their parents’ deaths. How can siblings foster healthy relationships once their parents are gone? Where do we start?

- Decide what you want from the relationships. Take some time and reflect on how you would ideally like your relationships with your siblings to look. What does a good sibling relationship mean to you? How much time and energy would you be willing to devote to these relationships?
- Talk to your siblings. Set aside time to talk to your siblings about the desires for your relationships. Ask if they also want to have healthy relationships and are willing to put time and energy into it.
- Seek professional help when needed. It is very common for siblings to become overwhelmed following their parents’ deaths. Furthermore, it is difficult to process the emotions, thoughts, and experiences alone. A counselor or social worker can help siblings work both together and individually to successfully move forward.
- Discuss the emotions. Many of us shy away from discussing how we feel, opting instead to talk about what we think. However, talking about our emotions allows us to have open communication while reducing the bickering that ensues when discussing facts. So much of our family baggage comes from our emotions and we need to air it out in order to move forward in a positive way.
- Make the relationship a priority. Healthy relationships require time and energy. Schedule the time to call or be together. No one will do this for you.

Healthy sibling relationships are irreplaceable, but they do take time and effort in order to be successful. Many sibling relationships suffer following parents’ deaths; however, they are not irreparable if siblings have the desire to stay connected.

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Amy Neu provides private therapy for adults, families and seniors. She has significant experience counseling seniors, caregivers and families within medical systems and during transitional periods.