Building the Bridge to Prevention:
The Intersection of Sexual Violence & Eating Disorders

Trauma
Sexual or dating violence, CSA, sexual harassment

Family History

Culture
Exposure to harmful media, Gender norms, body image

Developing Eating Disorder Behaviors

National Sexual Violence Resource Center
877.739.3895 Toll-free
resources@nsvrc.org
www.nsvrc.org

Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape
800.692.7445 Toll Free
info@pcar.org
www.pcar.org
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<th>Family History</th>
<th>Sexual Violence</th>
<th>Eating Disorders</th>
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<td><strong>Biology:</strong> Research has shown a link between a person’s genes and developing an eating disorder. This may mean that developing an eating disorder is a genetic trait, similar to hair or eye color. While we can’t change the natural genetic makeup of a person, we can still use prevention strategies to address other environmental factors—reducing the risk of developing an eating disorder.</td>
<td>While not every person who experiences sexual violence will develop an eating disorder, several studies have found that experiencing sexual violence has a notable impact on whether or not a person will report an eating disorder (Sanci, Coffey, Olsson, Reid, Carlin &amp; Patton, 2008; Wonderlich, Wilsnack, Wilsnack &amp; Harris, 1996).</td>
<td>A person who experiences unusual eating patterns or extreme emotions, attitudes, and behaviors related to food and weight may be diagnosed with an eating disorder by a health professional. Eating disorders can have serious health consequences and can be very dangerous.</td>
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<td><strong>Cycle of Violence:</strong> Some families have an ongoing history of sexual abuse and family violence. While we can’t change a person’s family history with child sexual abuse, we can work to reduce the risk of one generation continuing the cycle of violence on the next. Providing good response, spaces for healing, and compassionate education may reduce the risk.</td>
<td><strong>Child sexual abuse:</strong> Women who had experienced one instance of sexual abuse before the age of 16 were 2.5 times more likely to report bulimic behaviors. Those who reported 2 or more instances of sexual abuse were 4.9 times more likely to report eating disorders. (Sanci et al., 2008)</td>
<td><strong>Coping Strategies:</strong> A person who develops an eating disorder after experiencing sexual violence may use control over food or weight as a way of regaining control over their body. Food may also provide physical and emotional comfort during difficult times.</td>
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<td><strong>Opportunities for Prevention:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Dating/Sexual Violence:</strong> When exploring the links between dating violence, date rape and developing an eating disorder, Ackard and Neumark-Sztainer (2002) found a major link. They also found that prior abuse by an adult was very common in these cases.</td>
<td><strong>Protection:</strong> After violence, a person may try to gain weight as a way to become less attractive, to become less visible, or to try to protect themselves from further violence and abuse (Dube, Anda, Whitfield, Brown, Felitti, Dong &amp; Giles, 2005; see also <a href="http://www.acestudy.org">http://www.acestudy.org</a>).</td>
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<td>➢ Addressing environmental and societal factors that increase risk will support prevention activities for both sexual violence and eating disorders.</td>
<td><strong>Sexual Harassment:</strong> Another study found that experiencing sexual harassment was linked with behaviors associated with eating disorders (DePatie, Woods &amp; Buchanan, 2008).</td>
<td><strong>Body Blame:</strong> Some individuals report difficulties with body image and self-esteem after experiencing sexual violence, blaming their bodies for the actions of the person who assaulted them. The high rates of bulimic behaviors in particular can indicate an individual’s efforts to “cleanse” or “purify” as they work through their pain.</td>
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<td>➢ Critical media literacy, challenging gender norms, and developing a healthy connection with the body are all areas for prevention and trauma-informed response.</td>
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**References:**