

Eating Disorders During the Pandemic and their Legacy

By: Ella Heydenfeldt

June 9, 2024

Wake up at 7 am, grab a quick breakfast, and hop in the car to get to school on time. Attend classes all day, snack on your packed lunch, and then it's off to sports practice after school ends. Finally, at 6 pm, home. Make some dinner, then scamper up to the bedroom to do homework and shower.

This chaotic, busy day was a typical norm for millions of students across the United States. Yes, instead of a car, maybe it was a bus; instead of sports practice, it was acting. However, this routine is a pretty classic one of many young people in America.

This routine changed drastically in early 2020.

It became, at least for me, waking up and having my first Zoom class in my pajamas. I would head downstairs by 9 am and make a large breakfast in the kitchen, typically inspired by one of the tik-toks I had seen. I experimented with different overnight oats, whipped coffee, and acai bowls.

By 11 am, I was in my next Zoom class; typically, by 1 pm, I was off the clock. I would go for a hike or watch a YouTube workout video, make more food, watch movies, and paint in the backyard.

When COVID-19 first hit, it was honestly relaxing for my family and me. I recognize the privilege I have in getting to say that, and I am incredibly grateful that no one I knew perished from the virus.

As COVID-19 progressed, my screen time continued to skyrocket. As a kid who has always had self-image problems, my previous for-you page of healthy recipes turned a shade darker.

Now, I was no longer getting just cooking videos but also "What I Eat in a Day" videos, where people, typically "models," shared what they ate. Sometimes, it was multiple meals; other times, it was a rice cake.

All this extra time and energy poured into sports and homework pivoted into being focused on health and exercise. This was counteracted as all I would do was eat when I was bored.

I soon discovered that it felt like there was a tiny voice in my head that would not leave me alone unless I ate my way through the pantry.

I went harder with my at-home workouts, doing multiple a day, but I also ate like each meal would be my last. I had already had a guilt factor when it came to "bad" foods, those with high sugar and carbs. But now, I had a guilt factor when it came to just food. Period.

Any calorie intake was ridiculed.

As it turns out, what was occurring inside my household was not a rarity.

The National Eating Disorders Association helpline saw a 40 percent jump in call volume starting in March 2020. Thirty-five percent of these callers were in the 13—to 17-year-old age category, an increase from the 30% in the year before the pandemic.

There are many factors that go into the development of an eating disorder. How you grew up, your parents, socioeconomic factors, sports, societal pressures, etc. However, the pandemic did something that was unexpected.

It forced people to stay in one place. Because it did so, the screen felt like a door to the outside world to many. However, screens can be tools as well as harmful objects.

There is an entire category on TikTok for those with disordered eating, either sharing their journey or promoting harmful practices disguised to be "healthy." There are also categories that may be more helpful to eating disorders. Still, either way, it is a dangerous rabbit hole.

Not only was there increased screen time due to lockdown, but also increased time with family. If someone in your household has an eating disorder, the chances you develop one as well go up. One study found that women who have family members with anorexia are 11 times as likely to develop the disease as those without affected families.

Now, imagine you were raised by a UGA cheerleader born in the late 1960s. This cheerleader has led a life with weekly weigh-ins in college coupled with a no-carb, no-sugar diet that has been strictly followed for decades.

Now, in 2024, life has largely gone back to normal, and kids are back to their crazy schedules. But for a kid like me, who was in high school during lockdown and is now in college, I will never forget how quickly life can change on a dime.

As said previously, many factors went into the development of my disordered eating, but the pandemic felt like the final nail in the coffin.

At college, young people, including myself, now face new hurdles as we learn to grocery shop and cook food on a budget while balancing new schedules.

As it turns out, each phase of life presents different challenges to managing food and exercise.

However, a previous phase of lockdown and quarantine may leave a legacy of pervasive effects on those who may have picked up an entirely different illness during the years of COVID-19.

Word count: 852