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Values must show young women it's OK to eat well

By Dina Zeckhausen

For the Journal-Constitution

Monday, March 30, 2009

Maureen Downey's column (@issue, March 23) highlighted the problem of "College women are running on empty." The statistics she featured — 35 percent of female college students feeling sad and hopeless, 83 percent of college women dieting — are frightening and very real.

As a psychologist, I see these women in my office every day: they are succumbing to anxiety, depression and eating disorders. Our best and brightest young women, our nation's future movers and shakers, are too busy counting calories and pounds to maximize their potential as students. They are canaries in the coal mine, the first to drop from toxic pressures.

Just a few weeks ago, a local charity, the Eating Disorders Information Network or EDIN, hosted its annual Merrick's Walk & Fun Run in memory of Merrick Ryan, a high-achieving college student. At age 19, these pressures contributed to her death from anorexia. The tagline for this year's event was "I Will Not Run on Empty."

It's easy to feel helpless in the face of such powerful forces in our kids lives, especially peer and media influences. However, as parents and role models, we cannot afford to throw in the towel.

EDIN is implementing innovative school prevention programs based on principles that contribute to depression and eating disorders. These programs are creating resilient young women able to resist unhealthy pressures.

One program is "L.U.L.A." — Luv Ur Life Always — where teens discuss the dangers of dieting, the lies of the media and the importance of listening to their body signals. These teens are speaking out about unrealistic, Photoshopped images and media pressures; they educate their peers about the warning signs of an eating disorder; they promote healthy ways to cope with stress and pressure. This program is spreading rapidly through Atlanta public and private schools.

Many teens in L.U.L.A. bring these ideas with them to college, forming similar campus clubs to provide support and information for their sorority sisters and peers. Since the seeds of negative body image are sown in grade school, EDIN's Love Your Body programs reach elementary school children with important messages about listening to their bodies and healthy ways to cope with stress. Yes, young children are stressed. But these programs are not in every school: home is the place where the tide can turn.

Increased economic pressures have added another layer of stress. The childhood obesity epidemic is partly a result of overwhelmed kids turning to food for comfort; other eating disorders are our children's best efforts to try to control inner turmoil. Children who develop eating problems (both over-eating and under-eating) are typically the bright, sensitive kids. They are the kids with a sixth sense about others' feelings, who will do whatever they can to

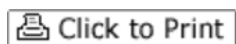
reduce their parents' stress. It can be the kid parents aren't worried about who's at higher risk for developing an eating disorder.

Parents need to honestly assess the ways our attitudes and actions regarding food, weight, feelings and gender roles are impacting our kids. If we are caught up in the latest diet craze or focused on appearances to the detriment of developing a deeper inner life, the culture's superficial values are just further solidified in our homes. By becoming conscious parents, we can provide a buffer of sanity between our children and these damaging cultural messages. That way, by the time our child leaves home for college, she will know how to listen to and take care of her body. She wouldn't dream of running on empty.

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