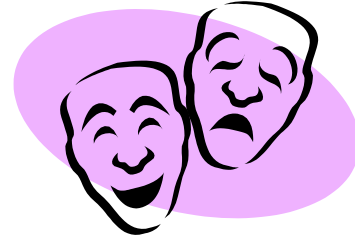


## CHAPTER 6

### EMOTIONAL ISSUES

**Being overweight can create challenges for both children and adults. In addition to the impact on your physical health, obesity can affect your social and emotional well-being. One study showed that the quality of life experienced by obese children was the same as kids going through cancer treatment!**



#### **Some of the areas where obesity has an impact include:**

**Social acceptance.** Prejudice against obesity starts at a young age. Even preschoolers are more likely to assume obese people are "lazy", "dirty", "stupid" and "ugly". These biases can make it tough for kids to form friendships. In one survey, 70% of children felt that if they were thinner, they would have more friends. In addition, overweight children are often teased and left out of group activities. Some overweight children compensate for teasing and peer rejection by becoming the class clown. Others may use their bulk to force acceptance of peers by becoming a bully.

**Self-esteem.** Being overweight makes children feel that they stand out from their peers. This self-consciousness often translates into negative opinions about their appearance and abilities. These feelings can worsen dramatically in the teen years. As a result, obese teenagers often feel sad, lonely, and nervous. They are also more likely to take on risky behaviors such as smoking and drinking. Children are frequently their own worst critics. Many will be very

hard on themselves, and in the process may sabotage their own health to meet their very low expectations of themselves. It is important to help them accept themselves as important people, quit worrying, and start sweating!

**Depression.** Low self-esteem and social rejection can lead to depression. In turn, depression can add to the problems of overeating and lack of physical activity. This can make weight loss even harder or lead to more weight gain.

Depression can also be very dangerous. Teens who are teased about their weight are three times more likely to think about suicide or attempt suicide than their peers who are not teased about their weight.

#### **Warning Signs of Depression**

**Depression often takes a different form in children and teens than in adults. Parents should seek help for their child if they notice one or more of these signs:**

- Frequent bouts of sadness or crying
- Sense of hopelessness
- Decreased interest in favorite activities or inability to enjoy things
- Ongoing boredom or low energy
- Social isolation or poor communication
- Low self-esteem and guilt
- Extreme sensitivity to failure and rejection
- Irritability, anger, or hostility
- Problems with relationships
- Frequent physical complaints such as headaches and stomachaches
- Problems concentrating
- Absences from school or poor academic performance
- Major changes in eating and sleeping habits
- Talk of running away from home or attempts to runaway
- Self-destructive behavior or talk of suicide

**School performance.** Overweight children often have trouble in school. Behavioral problems and academic performance both can be issues. A medical condition called obstructive sleep apnea (see Chapter 5: Medical Problems of Obesity) is sometimes the culprit. However, poor self-esteem, social difficulties, and depression can also contribute to the problem. Part of the school problem can be related to the teasing described above. Who would want to go to school when they are teased all day? In fact, obese children and teens miss an average of 4.2 days of school every month.

It is important to remember that classmates are not the only problem. Nearly one third of teenage girls report being teased about their weight by someone in their family, and parents themselves are often criticized and made to feel guilty about their child's obesity. This can lead to further family conflict that worsens the depression and low self-esteem in the child. Think about how you talk to your child about weight, food, and exercise: Are you being critical and judgmental, or supportive and helpful? Are you angry at them for the criticism of your own peer group? Do you blame them or yourself for their obesity? Remember that obesity is a family lifestyle issue. No one is to blame, but everyone can be a part of the solution.



### **The importance of getting help**

Good emotional health is part of an overall healthy lifestyle. For that reason, it is important to deal with the emotional as well as the physical aspects of obesity. Emotional issues can get in the way of making changes needed for a healthy lifestyle. Also, the emotional fallout from obesity, such as poor self-esteem and depression, can extend into adulthood if not spotted early.

A professional counselor such as a psychiatrist, psychologist, or social worker can help children and families tackle the emotional issues around overweight. Mental health counselors vary in their training and professional focus. When choosing a counselor, look for someone who has experience treating children or teenagers.

Most importantly, look for a person who is a good match and who you will be comfortable working with.

**The following are places where you can find more information on child and family mental health services and get referrals:**

- Doctor, pediatrician, or school counselor
- Local or national mental health organizations and hotlines
- Employee Assistance Program at your workplace
- Local hospitals or medical centers
- Self-help and support groups
- County or state mental health departments

