

What's Your Problem?

"Why can't you get it together?"

"I'm trying everything I know to get a grip on my food problem."

"We are sick of your problem."

"What is my problem?"

People get lost in the search for solutions to eating disorders. This is true of sufferers, their family members, and loved ones. I hear comments like the ones stated above all the time, usually from sufferers and significant others when the battle gets too heated. What happens is that the focus returns to the tangible: food. I emphasize approaching this issue from a different angle.

As the sufferer of anorexia, bulimia, or binge eating disorder grows more impatient, frantic, and discouraged in his or her fight against the disease, there is often a return to the original way of viewing the eating disorder, i.e. it's about food. Yes, it manifests in unhealthy ways of dealing with food, but the search is for the solution to the wrong thing—the food problem. What is wrong is her feelings and not knowing how to handle them or how to deal with situations that arise. Food has become the default solution, but he has trouble identifying what the real problem is in the first place, e.g. lacking coping skills, knowing how to express oneself, managing emotions, etc.

So well-intentioned loved ones will throw suggestions at the identified patient: try this meeting or this book or this diet. Those can be wonderful adjuncts in the process of recovery. However, think of these suggestions as ways to learn to cope, to deal, to feel, to learn—not necessarily ways to "eat right."

There are hundreds of diets out there. We see them come and go. Jenny Craig, Weight Watchers, the Paleo Diet, Atkins, South Beach, Mediterranean, vegetarian, vegan; then there are diet pills and supplements. Why do they come and go? Well, without getting technical, diets don't work—at least, not for the long haul. People with eating disorders usually develop their illness from going on a diet. That doesn't mean that dieting causes eating disorders, or that there aren't multifactorial issues at play. There are. The common denominator, though, is typically a diet. And when the work of recovery (including therapy) becomes too difficult and not instantly gratifying, these sufferers want to go right back to a diet in order to "fix" things.

Again, they have missed the problem. Developing an eating disorder is much more complicated than a diet gone awry, and recovering from one is much more complicated than finding the perfect diet. It's more complicated than finding the perfect solution! In fact, perfectionism could be part of the problem, but that's a topic for a different article. When stuck on finding the solution, perhaps try asking a different question.