

AWARENESS OF EATING DISORDERS IN SOCIETY

- IN THE EYES OF STUDENTS AND PARENTS

WHAT ARE EATING DISORDERS?

Eating disorders can be defined as a set of emotional disorders affecting the patterns of our behavior, which impacts our health, mental, and physical functioning of the body. Eating disorders include: anorexia nervosa (*anorexia nervosa*), bulimia (*bulimia nervosa*), binge eating disorder, pica disorder, and many others. These abnormalities are particularly difficult to treat due to their extraordinary complexity, the contemporary cultural norms, and the cult of a slim body (Namysłowska I., 2014).

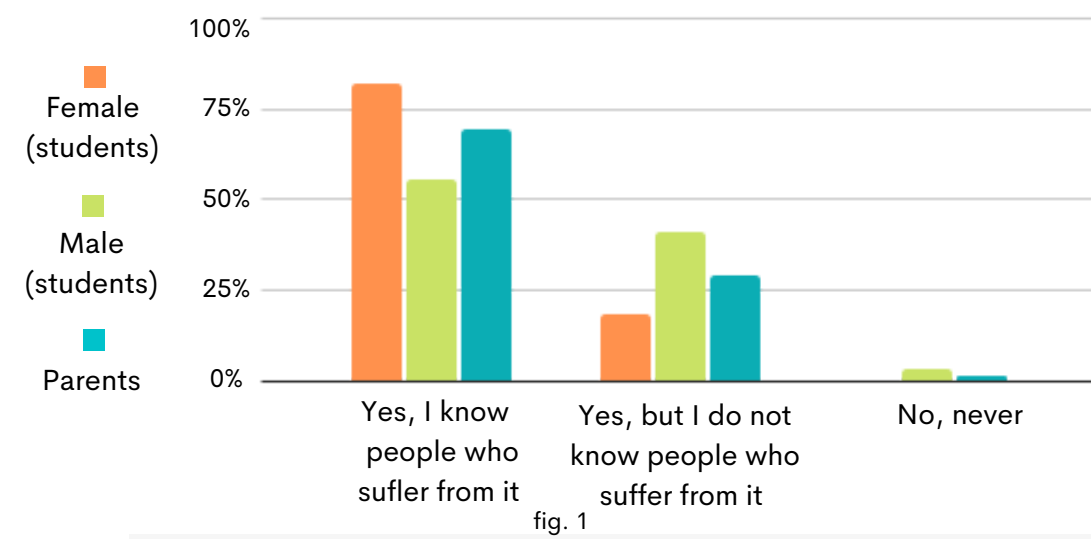
GLOBAL STATISTICS

It is estimated that this phenomenon affects from 0.7 to 2.3-4 percent of the population, and it is 1.5 times more common in women than in men. The prevalence of eating disorders among people on weight reduction programs ranges from 15 to 50% (Namysłowska I., 2014). Suicidal thoughts and attempts occur in 26% of patients (ANAD, (n. d.)). Due to complications of the disease or suicide (which is committed by 2-9% of patients (Namysłowska I., 2014)), 5-24% of patients die, and as many as 10,200 deaths per year are a direct result of eating disorders (ANAD, (n/d)).

According to ANAD (National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders) data, eating disorders affect at least 9% of the world's population, and only 6% of those are diagnosed as underweight.

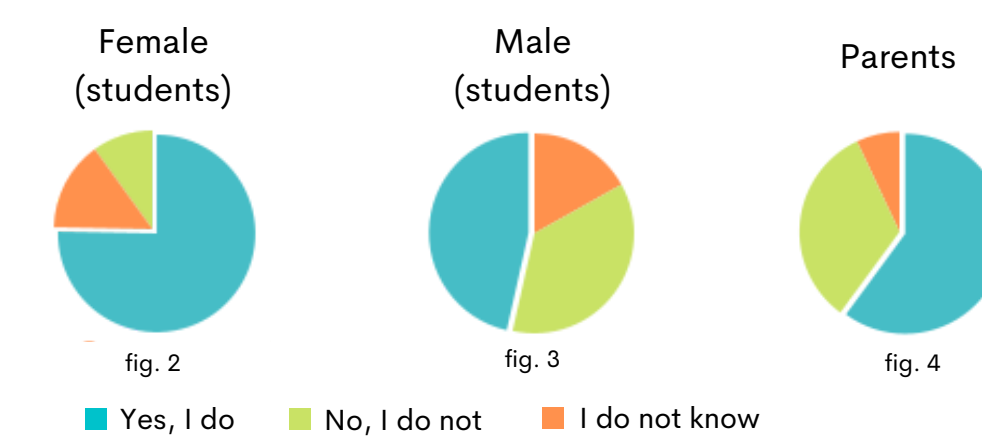
A distorted perception of one's own body occurs even among school-age children - 42% of girls in primary schools declare that they would like to be slimmer, while 35-57% of adolescent girls use drastic diets, starvation, or emetics and laxatives. (ANAD, (n/a))
* The ANAD research has been conducted among American students.

Have you ever heard about eating disorders?

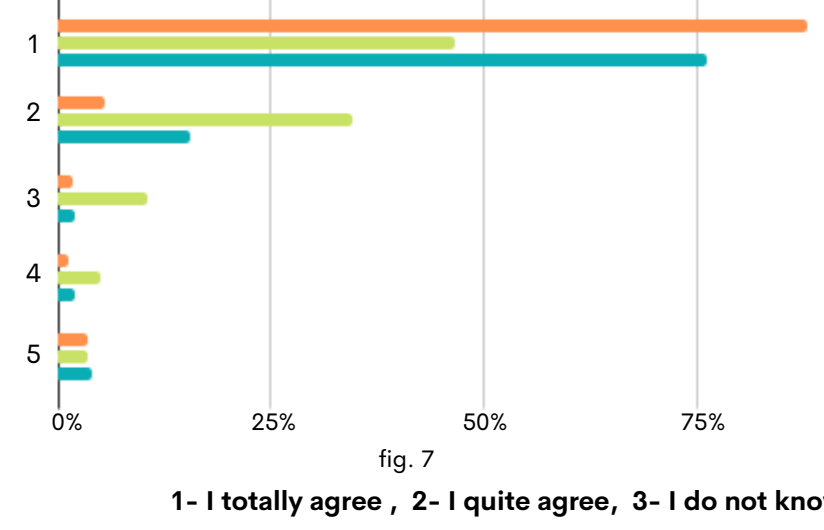


Most young women have heard about eating disorders and know people who suffer from it. Only 18.2% have not personally encountered this issue (fig. 1) and 75.3% have noticed some manifestations of this disease in their environment (fig. 2). This aspect looks different among male students and parents; some responders had never heard about eating disorders (fig. 1), an average of 2.5% of responders in each group.

Do you observe signs of a disturbed relationship with food in your environment?

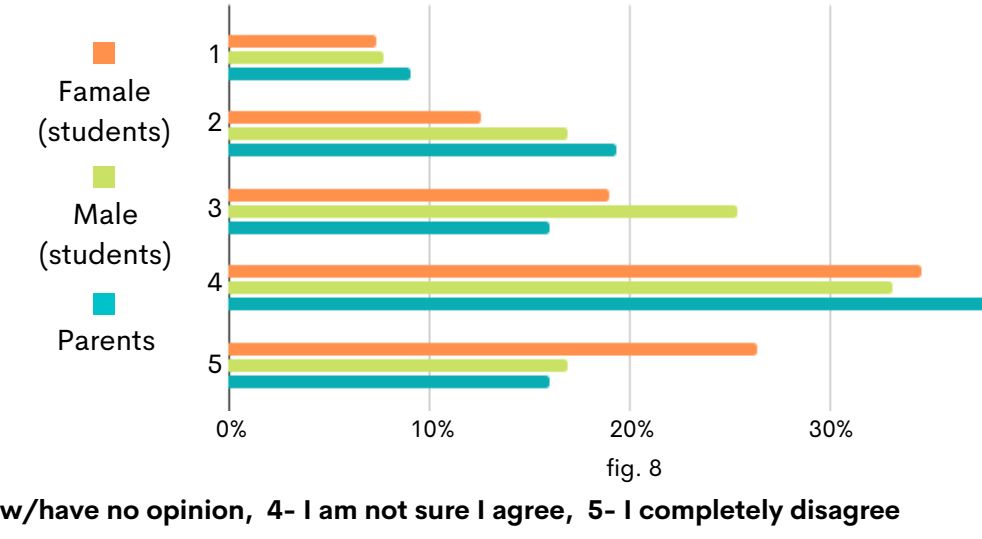


Eating disorders are a serious topic that should be discussed.



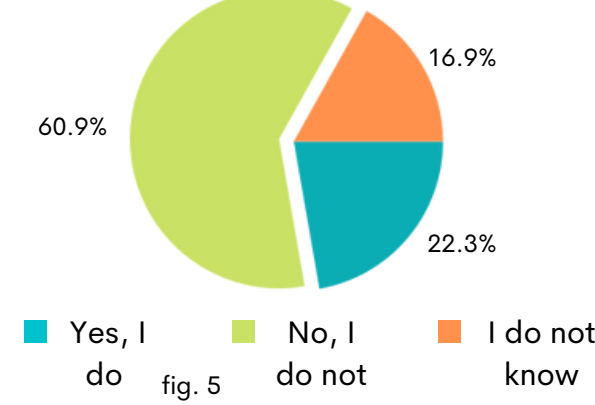
Almost 90% of female students and over 75% of parents completely agree with the statement that eating disorders are a serious topic that should be discussed. Male students chose the option that they agree with this statement (34-46%) much more rarely. The reason for this could be the fact that young women and parents are more familiar with the problem (fig. 1 and 2).

There is enough awareness of eating disorders nowadays.

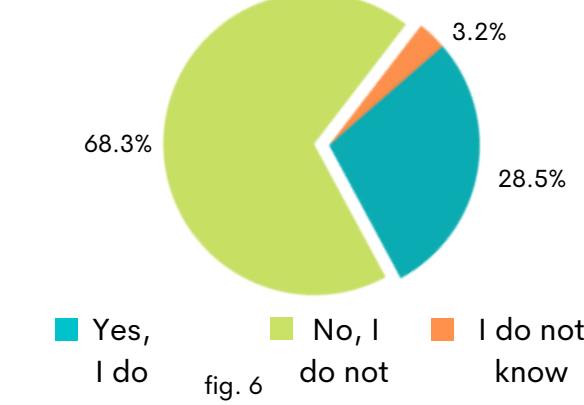


Most respondents from each group are not sure if there is enough awareness of eating disorders nowadays. 8% of the respondents completely agree with the statement. The largest group that think the problem is known well enough are parents.

Do you think your parent/s suffer from a disturbed perception of their own body?

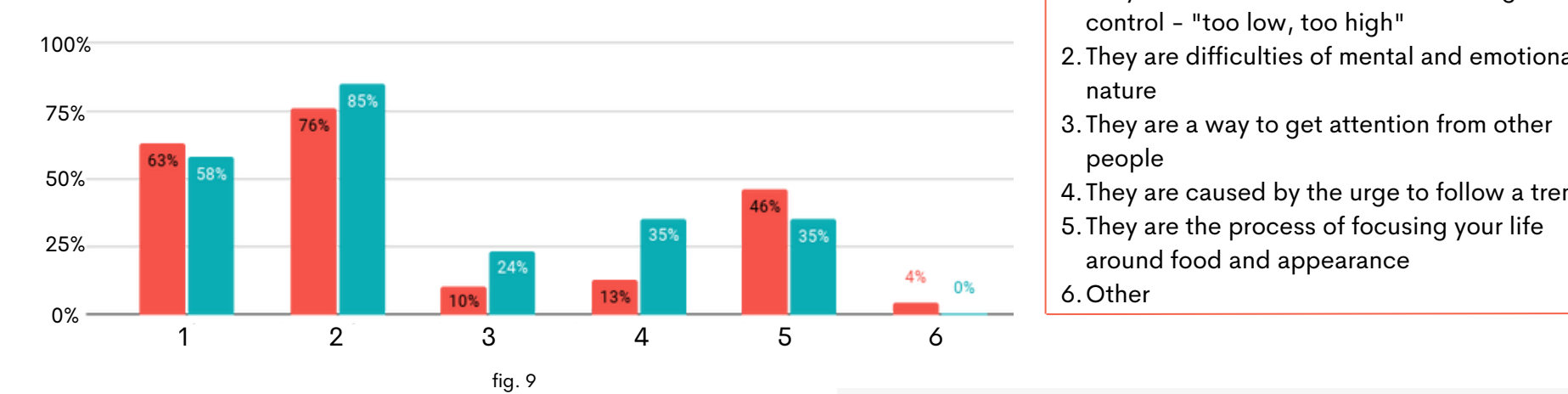


Do you think your child suffers from a disturbed perception of their body?



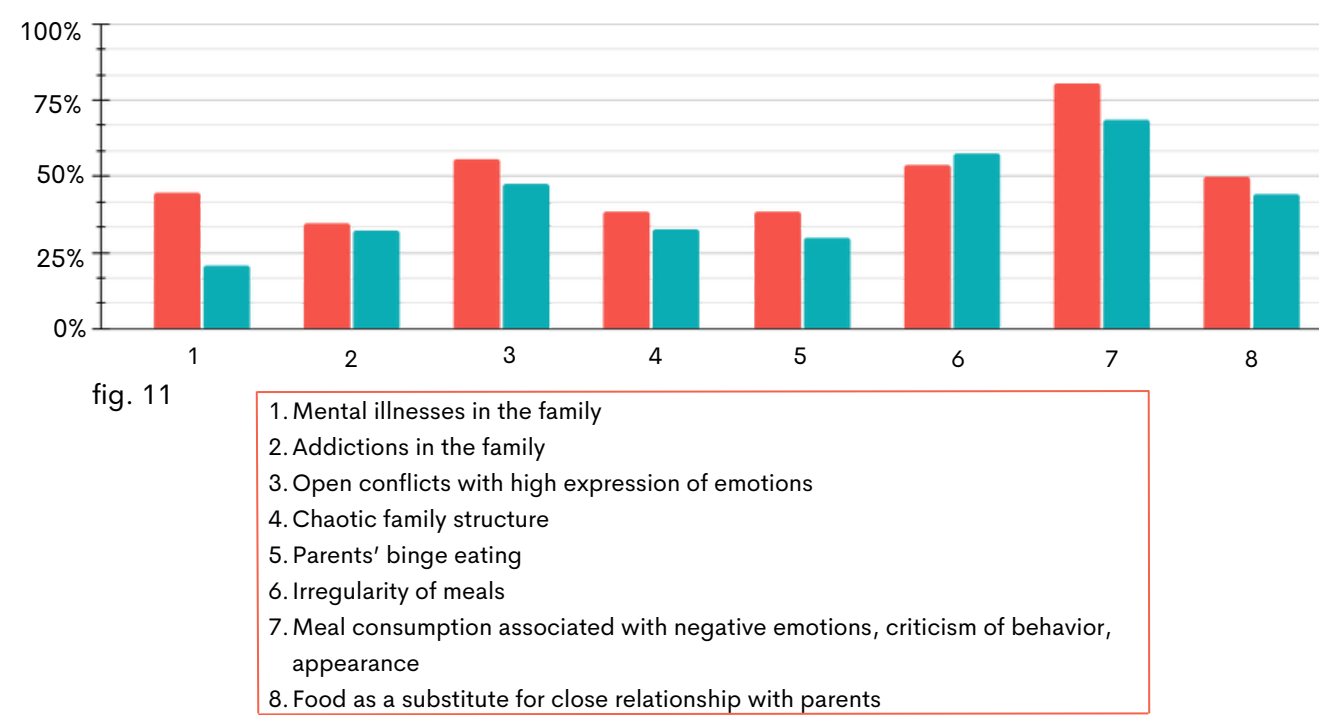
Charts 5 and 6 show the percentage of people who observe problems with disturbed perception of their own body (which is a common issue in eating disorders) among their close family members (children/parents). Both charts show seemingly similar data, with differences of up to 14%. The majority of both groups do not notice irregularities in the way their close family members perceive their body shape, but as many as 22.3% students (83 out of 273) can see this problem in their parents while 59.2% of students perceive the family as a factor having a significant impact on their own relationship with their body (fig. 10).

Which of the following best illustrates what an eating disorder means to you?



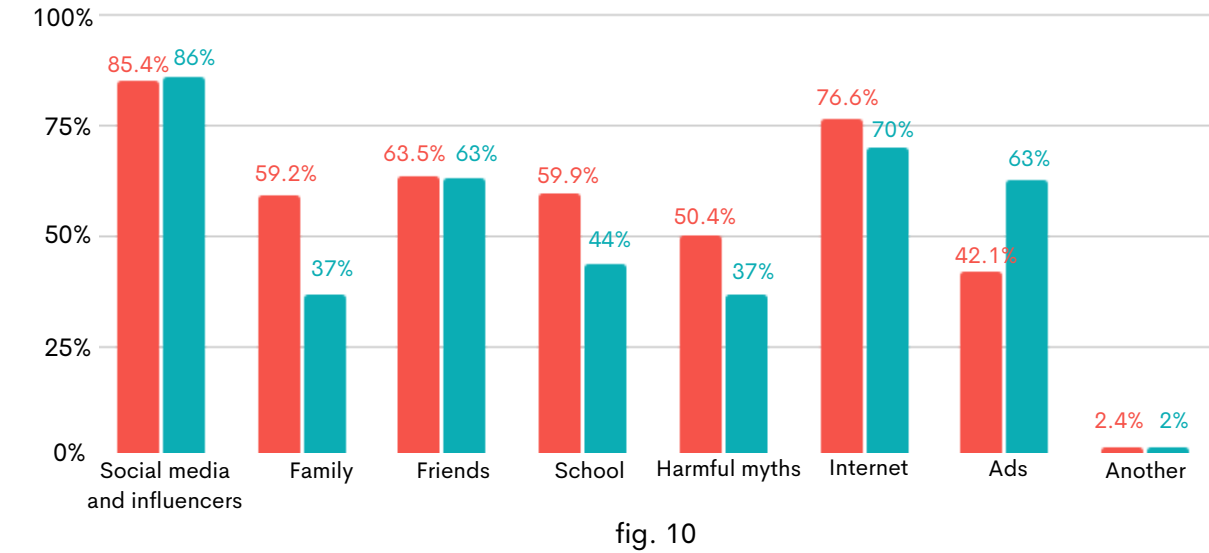
Parents see the problem of eating disorders as a difficulty limited to the need to adapt to the environment and to gain attention. Chart 9 shows a clear disproportion in the responses to these issues. The new generation, which is much more familiar with eating disorders, treats these mental disorders as a form of focusing on body weight, appearance, and eating issues. However, both groups are almost consistent in the statement that these disorders are difficulties of a mental origin, and they do have an impact on controlling one's body weight.

Which of the family factors do you think increases the risk of developing an eating disorder the most?



According to chart no. 11, a certain similarity between the answers in the two surveyed groups can be observed. Both the students and the parents consider irregularity in eating schedule as the factor that increases the risk of illness, rather than, for example, addictions among family members. It is also worth noting that the option 'Mental illnesses among family members' was chosen more often by students than by parents.

Which of the factors listed below have, in your opinion, a large impact on the perception of your own body shape?



Despite the belief that eating disorders are a mental problem (as indicated by 282 students and 206 parents), only 237 students and 99 parents from this group answered that this type of disorder can affect people of any body weight in the question "Who can get sick?".

TARGETS AND HYPOTHESES

The purpose of this survey and research is to study the awareness of the occurrence of eating disorders in society and to recognize similarities and differences in the perception of this problem by students and by parents. The research also determines the influence of parents on the perception of teenager's body shape and their attitude towards food.

- Eating disorders are the most common problem young women face
- Are they the parents, in the opinion of the respondents, who mainly influence the perception of their body shape?
- The topic of eating disorders is a growing problem that is not sufficiently addressed
- Teenagers are more aware of eating disorders than parents

MOTIVATION/ WHAT PROMPTED US TO RAISE THIS TOPIC?

We decided to conduct the research on eating disorders inclined by the observation that this issue is becoming an object of interest on the Internet and fashion world again. As biology, chemistry, and nutrition are the major subjects our class taught, so this topic is not new to us; on the contrary, we encounter and notice behaviors that promote an unhealthy relationship with food, the body, and other related aspects (eating disorders) increasingly often.

METHODS AND MATERIALS:

The research was based on a survey conducted on 21/12/2022-04/01/2023. It was addressed to people aged 12-19 and parents of young people this age. The survey was returned by 614 people, out of whom 373 were students (231 women and 142 men) and 241 were parents (173 women and 68 men). The survey was divided into two parts - for students (teenagers) and for parents. It begins with a question establishing the group membership, i.e. which group the respondent belongs to. Ten questions were the same for both groups (3 single-choice questions, 5 multiple-choice questions, and 6 using the Likert scale), as well as one addressed exclusively to the particular group. Both groups could also answer a non-mandatory open-ended question.

The survey was carried out in Poland, online, using Google Forms. To create the poster, we used the Canva software.

WHAT IDEAS DID THE RESPONDENTS HAVE THAT MAY HELP TO SPREAD AWARENESS ABOUT EATING DISORDERS?

Most of the responses to the the open question on taking steps to raise public awareness of this issue indicated the following options:

- Creating social campaigns
- Open conversation - no taboo topics
- Spreading naturalness in social media
- Informing parents about the existing problem
- Education: workshops, meetings with specialists, and lectures in schools

In total, there were 411 answers to this question; all the answers suggested similar solutions.

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SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Our research shows that teenage girls and parents notice the problem of eating disorders more often. This may be due to the fact that women are more likely to suffer from the aforementioned disorders than men (Namysłowska I., 2014). This would explain why teenage girls have much more knowledge and awareness of the problem discussed. Parents, despite encountering this problem, do not have that much awareness of factors that may exacerbate the course of such mental illnesses. Furthermore, the majority of parents think that there is enough awareness of eating disorders nowadays (with which most of the students disagreed).

Studies have shown that both parents and students mainly indicate irregular meals as a factor that increases the risk of getting sick. It can be assumed that this answer is related to the first thoughts of the respondents after reading the statement "eating disorders" - where they subconsciously direct their attention towards nutrition and food.

Some of the survey results may be disturbing. Most parents do not notice alarming signals in their children, but it is worth bearing in mind that only 37% of parents recognize the family as the cause of difficulties with self-acceptance of their own body shape by young people. On the other hand, 59.20% of young people pointed to the family as the factor influencing the perception of their body. The disproportion is as much as 22.2%. This means that parents may be completely unaware of how much influence they can have on their children.

Although both parents and students are aware of the problem, there is much ignorance among both groups. Many of those surveyed, despite knowing that eating disorders are mental health issues, do not seem to acknowledge that eating disorders can affect people of any body mass (however, in the student group, correct answers were more common).

Fortunately, the majority of people know that this is the topic that is not discussed widely enough and should be talked about more. This is confirmed by the number of responses from all the respondents, who mostly focused on open conversation and education.