

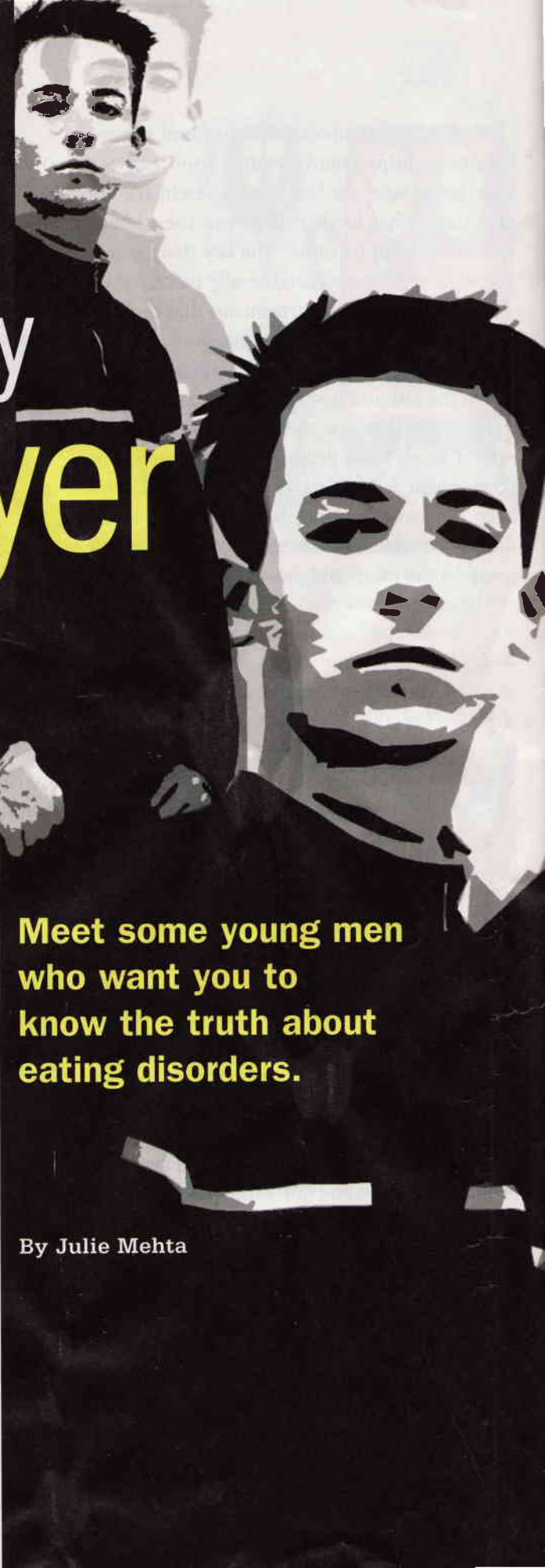
# An Equal- Opportunity Destroyer

**C**hris\* thought being anorexic just meant being really skinny. Patrick thought only models got anorexia. Zach hadn't heard much about eating disorders at all. And when a doctor told Brady he might have an eating disorder, the then 14-year-old's reaction was, "Me? But I'm a guy!"

All those young men learned the hard way that eating disorders are life-threatening mental illnesses that can affect anyone, regardless of age or race—or gender. "Eating disorders happen to guys the same way they happen to girls," says Dr. Ovidio Bermudez, medical director of the Eating Disorders Program at Laureate Psychiatric Clinic and Hospital in Tulsa, Okla. "It's not different. It's not weird. It's not just for girls. Men can suffer the same emotional and physical complications from an eating disorder."

In fact, more than 1 million boys and men in the U.S. are struggling with anorexia or bulimia. Experts have long estimated that about 10 percent of those with eating disorders are male, but a 2007 Harvard University study indicated that boys and men might account for as many as 25 percent of eating disorder sufferers.

*\*Name has been changed.*



**Meet some young men  
who want you to  
know the truth about  
eating disorders.**

By Julie Mehta

Three of the most common eating disorders are anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge-eating disorder.

**ANOREXIA** is self-starvation (by extreme limitation of calories—anorexics eat, just very little), typically resulting in excessive weight loss.

**BINGE-EATING DISORDER** is the consumption of excessive amounts of food (more than people usually eat in one sitting).

**BULIMIA** is a cycle of bingeing and purging, or ridding the body of any food eaten (by vomiting, exercise, laxatives, or other means).

Overall, anorexia has a higher death rate than any other mental illness, according to the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA).

### Never Enough

Brady Graves, now 18, knows how close he came to being part of that statistic. Growing up in a small Arkansas town, Graves had a traumatic childhood and was teased a lot. Depressed, he began skipping lunch in middle

school. He changed schools repeatedly, and though he made more friends and got a girlfriend, his eating issues continued.

“I was never happy. I was with a popular crowd, but I thought, ‘I’m not making good enough grades; I’m not good enough at sports.’ Nothing was ever good enough,” Graves told *Current Health*. “I started eating a box of doughnuts or a fast-food meal and then purging it through vomiting and laxatives.”

That low self-esteem is typically found in people struggling with eating disorders. “In terms of temperament, the risk factors are the same for both girls and boys—perfectionist, overachiever, anxious, conflict-avoidant, a driven individual who may have some difficulty expressing feelings,” says Bermudez. “On top of that, there may be negative experiences like teasing or feeling rejected socially.” There is some evidence that eating disorders may run in families, he adds, and that genes may be involved.

For Patrick Bergstrom of Maryland, a disappointing end to his college lacrosse career was enough to trigger a four-year battle with eating disorders. He’d always been a star athlete, gotten good grades, dated the “popular” girl—and didn’t know how to deal with negative emotions. “I had a perfectionist drive to excel at everything. I never wanted to let anyone down. And I was focused on superficial stuff instead of who I really am,” says Bergstrom, now 26.

### Crossing the Line

Eating disorders are more about thoughts and feelings than body or food. But experts suggest that society’s focus on the superficial—think of all those unrealistically perfect bodies in the media—is partly to blame for the increase in eating disorders in both sexes. “Most boys are just as concerned about body image as girls but don’t admit it,” says Sam Lample, assistant clinical director of ReddStone, a male-only residential eating disorder treatment program at Remuda Ranch in Wickenburg, Ariz. Just as girls feel pressure to be thinner, boys are influenced by images of “ripped abs and overly defined pecs,

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biceps, and shoulders,” says Lample. Boys, he adds, “are caught between two seemingly opposing ideals—thinness and masculinity,” which can lead to body dissatisfaction.

For some boys, the role models can be much closer to home. Zach Roberts, 18, of Arizona, wanted to be more fit, like his older brother was. He started reading nutrition labels and soon knew how many calories, fat grams, and carbs were in practically any food. Roberts began eating all low-calorie foods; meanwhile, he was also running and lifting weights to burn off the calories he did consume. Eventually, he was restricting his diet so much that his heart rate dropped dangerously low. “It kind of snuck up on me,” Roberts admits.

“Many people start down the path of an eating disorder with the concept of improving themselves by eating healthier and exercising,” Bermudez explains. But for people who have certain risk factors, diets can lead to unhealthy eating habits. “The behaviors change the way the brain works,” notes Bermudez, “and the mind becomes diseased, which leads to loss of perspective and distorted self-perception.”

Sports can also add to the problem, says Bermudez, especially activities in which weight is

important, such as football, swimming, or wrestling. Chris, 14, of Georgia, recalls his wrestling coach two years ago giving some tips on how to make weight for matches. Chris was already restricting his diet and having problems concentrating at school. “It just progressed, and I didn’t feel like I could stop,” he says.

### Opening Up

Fortunately, Chris got treatment for his eating disorder at ReddStone, where he also learned he had obsessive-compulsive disorder, anxiety, and depression. Many eating-disorder sufferers have other mental illnesses too. Substance abuse is common among males with eating disorders.

Bergstrom says it was his heavy drinking that drew the most attention, rather than the fact that he’d sometimes eat nothing more than a bagel the entire day. Besides losing weight, he felt faint and had trouble sleeping. “I see a picture of me then, and I looked terrible—my skin was pale, my cheeks puffy, my hair thinning,” Bergstrom says. After his fiancée broke off their engagement, he finally found the courage to tell his family about his problems and seek treatment in 2008 at Canopy Cove Eating Disorders Treatment Center in Tallahassee, Fla., which just last year launched a male-only residential program.

Some experts believe single-sex therapy helps both boys and girls open up about the deeper issues behind their eating disorders. Treatment for both girls and boys generally includes medication, consistent nutrition, and therapy. And treatment is essential. “Having an eating disorder long enough can damage a person’s heart and brain function permanently, delay brain development, stunt growth, damage the esophagus and stomach, and cause thinning of the bones and osteoporosis. Complications could prevent a female from getting pregnant and [cause] lower testosterone levels in a male,” Lample says.

Graves’s eating disorder contributed to his dropping out of school and using drugs. He tried treatment several times but avoided talking about his traumatic childhood. Graves

## Get the Facts

- Up to 10 million girls and women and 1 million boys and men in the U.S. are battling anorexia or bulimia.
- An estimated 40 percent of those with binge-eating disorder are boys or men.
- Most eating disorders are diagnosed during puberty, the late teen years, or the early adult years.
- Without treatment, up to 20 percent of those with eating disorders die from their illnesses; with treatment, the figure drops to 2 percent.

### NATIONAL EATING DISORDERS ASSOCIATION

[www.myneda.org](http://www.myneda.org)

Confidential, toll-free help line, available Monday–Friday,  
8:30 a.m.–4:30 p.m. PST: 800-931-2237



# NO MORE SECRETS

If you think a friend is struggling with an eating disorder, remember that he or she may have a distorted sense of reality. So be prepared for your friend to deny the problem. If that happens, find a trusted adult to share your concerns with.

## HERE ARE SOME WARNING SIGNS THAT A FRIEND MAY NEED HELP:

- experiencing sudden weight loss or fluctuating weight
- withdrawing from friends and family
- avoiding meals or becoming very picky about foods
- going to the bathroom immediately after meals
- increasingly focusing on foods and nutrition labels
- becoming extremely anxious and guilty about missing workouts or other exercise routines

“Don’t try to be a therapist or doctor, but do tell the friend about your concern in a nonjudgmental and caring fashion,” says Dr. Ovidio Bermudez, an eating disorder program director. “The most important message to get across is ... to open up to someone they trust and seek professional help.”



became so emaciated and sick that his doctors thought he would die. And then he got a second chance at ReddStone.

“I was on a feeding tube for two months. And I said to myself, ‘I’m going to write everything down and tell all my stories, no matter how embarrassing,’” says Graves. “It was a life-changing experience.” What he realized was that his eating disorder was very much about dealing with his past. “I wanted control,” Graves says, “and I thought the only thing I could control was what went in and out of my mouth.” Nowadays, he focuses on living in the moment instead of dwelling on the past or worrying about the future.

Roberts found help at a male-only program at Rogers Memorial Hospital in Wisconsin. In addition to going through therapy, he learned to develop more interests, be more positive, and not sweat the small stuff. He’s now a college student taking premed courses.

## A Healthier Way

So how can you avoid developing an eating disorder, whether you’re a boy or a girl? “You have to live your life in balance,” says Lample. “In addition to taking care of the physical aspect of who you are, you need to be working on character development.” Aim for balance in

what you eat and exercise regularly instead of dieting. And if you want to lose weight, talk to your doctor first; he or she can put you in touch with a dietitian for more help.

Graves says it’s also crucial to let out your emotions so they don’t lead to self-destructive behaviors. “As much as they play it off, guys are as sensitive as girls,” he says. “Cry, write, or find some other outlet.”

And if you think you might have an eating disorder, Lample says, “know that you’re not alone and you’re not going crazy. Talk to an adult you trust and get hooked up with a doctor, registered dietitian, and therapist.”

Facing up to an eating disorder isn’t easy, but it’s necessary, says Bergstrom. His Web site, at [www.ichosetolive.com](http://www.ichosetolive.com), serves as a resource for people dealing with eating disorders. “I’d battle back and forth in my head, ‘Can I give this up? Do I want to?’ There’s this whole shame factor, especially with guys, because we think we can handle everything,” he points out. “If I’d realized it’s brave to ask for help, I would have gotten it much sooner.” **CH2**

## Think About It ...

Why, do you think, are body-image problems and eating disorders so common in teens of both sexes?