Eating Disorders Alpbach 2012: The 20th International Conference

Health Promotion and Prevention of Eating Disorders and Obesity

The 20th Eating Disorders Alpach Meeting took place in Alpach, Tyrol, Austria in October 18–20, 2012. The conference was hosted by Prof. Günther Rathner and organised by the non-profit institution Austrian Network Eating Disorders (Netzwerk Essstörungen) in cooperation with the Austrian Society on Eating Disorders (ASED) and the Innsbruck Medical University. Since the very first conference in 1991, not only experts, but also sufferers and carers could attend, a novelty at that time. There was a large attendance at the conference, with 236 persons from 17 countries and three continents (Europe, America and Australia).

To celebrate the 20th meeting, the up-to-date topic of "Health Promotion and Prevention of Eating Disorders and Obesity” was chosen as the main theme. Thus, a triple milestone was set: First, Eating Disorders and Obesity have a lot in common, but are often not discussed in combination, therefore the intersecting sets have been showed. Second, the conference was an opportunity for networking and exchange of information between important stakeholders, which have been coexisting, but not working together: Experts for Eating Disorders and Obesity fields (Scientists, Therapists, Support Groups, people suffering from eating disorders, legal guardians and intrigued persons) and professionals for Public Health, Health Promotion and Primary Prevention. Third, the 3rd European Symposia for Patients- and Carer-Organisations was focusing on Health Promotion and Prevention, too. Initiatives of European organisations have been presented, for example: Susan Ringwood (BEAT, UK), Jacinta Hastings (Bodywhys, Ireland) and Jäger, Waldherr and Rathner from Austria. Four out of five keynote lectures concentrated on Health Promotion and Prevention, also 75% of the Teaching Day workshops and about 50% of paper, poster and workshop presentations at the conference.

Prof. Dianne Neumark-Sztainer (Minneapolis, USA) characterized common dieting as the problem – but not the solution – when it comes to both eating disorders and obesity in youth. Young people often engage in dieting behaviors or utilize unhealthy weight control behaviors in order to lose weight or keep from gaining weight. However, within the eating disorders field, there is concern about the high prevalence of dieting among adolescents given its associated dangers. Prof. Dianne Neumark-Sztainer utilized data from her 10-year longitudinal study to explore whether dieting is truly effective in terms of weight loss and weight gain prevention. In contrast to dieting, she favoured health-promoting behaviour, which is effective in the prevention of both eating disorders and obesity.
Prof. Michael Levine (Gambier, USA) has addressed the necessity of multi-level efforts in universal and selective prevention and health promotion, by various professionals and other citizens, to prevent eating disorders in females and males. Prevention is not a luxury that awaits clarification of the causes of eating disorders or refinements in treatments. In fact, no disease or disorder has ever been eliminated or contained by treatment – only by prevention, he pointed out. Thus, Levine focused on the way in which professionals in particular – physicians, psychologists, dietitians, nurses, teachers, etc. – must integrate the following: their own knowledge, attitudes and behaviour; their professional work with clients, peers and students; and political efforts to change unhealthy aspects of culture.

Prof. Beate Wimmer-Puchinger, Dr. Sc. and Michaela Langer, M.Sc. (Wiener Programm für Frauengesundheit) said it’s necessary to move forward change from behavioural prevention to situational prevention. **Eating Disorders and Obesity are two sides of a coin.** Dieting, body dissatisfaction, weight bullying and stigmatization, societal thinness delusions and obsessions, which are transported via media and contribute a massive, global increase of body-dissatisfaction, are main reasons for the increasing prevalence of eating disorders and obesity. After decades of interventions of behavioral prevention there is a need of interventions of situational prevention for the future in cooperation with health experts, economy, industry and politics. These dimensions of relations and social environments have to get stronger and more serious attention and have to be arranged at different levels. In the symposia “Prevention of eating disorders AND obesity – a mission impossible?” it has been showed that the social environment is the main reason for a manipulated body (thinness obsessions and denial of aging), especially for young girls and women. A contest for public schools in Vienna was introduced: “We like everyBODY: Our school without thinness obsessions”. Congratulations for this initiative, which aims at “Unity in Diversity”!

Edith Flaschberger, M.Sc. (Ludwig Boltzmann Institute Health Promotion Research, Vienna, Austria) was talking about “Health promotion in schools as a promising concept for a prevention of eating disorders among pupils”. Specific prevention measures against eating disorders, or rather the common unreflected use of prevention measures against overweight and obesity in schools doesn’t prevent, but rather abets eating disorders. Thus stigmatization of non-normal-weight pupils or a negative relation to food can be a consequence. In contrast to prevention, the concept of health promotion primarily is striving to strengthen protective factors and to promote salutogenesis; the diminishment of risk factors, however, seems less important in this field. Health promotion in schools is a broad concept with the ambition to build a health promoting environment. Thus, self-confidence and self-esteem is strengthened, which serve as protecting factors against the development of eating disorders. To communicate competence, positive self-evaluation and self-determination is a holistic approach which not only improves school performance but also health and well-being of the pupils. Hence, eating disorders may be prevented by this approach.

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