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Something to Smile About

Patients come to Dr. Mary Viechnicki-Potter for various reasons. Some were born with a less-than-perfect smile. For others, though, the damage is the result of eating disorders.

“About 10 years ago, when I started practicing dentistry, eating disorders were more of an unspoken topic,” says the Haverford-based cosmetic dentist. “You didn’t see as much literature about it as you do now. It’s become much more of an epidemic over the past few years.”

These days, eating disorders are affecting children as young as middle school. “My daughter is in fifth grade, and I always have conversations with her about making healthy choices,” she says.

In bulimics, the destruction is evident on both the back and front of teeth. Every time a bulimic vomits, stomach acid wears away enamel. Once the enamel is gone, it corrodes the dentin layer beneath. “Dentin wears away 10-15 times faster than enamel,” says Viechnicki-Potter. “Once the dentin begins to deteriorate, the process really escalates.”

Anorexics lack the vitamins and calcium necessary for a healthy smile. “I’ve suffered from anorexia and bulimia since I was 14 years old,” says one of Viechnicki-Potter’s patients, a 36-year-old Allentown woman. “My teeth were falling out from all the cavities I had. I was in constant pain with toothaches and had to have several root canals. The teeth that weren’t falling out were really stained.”

After she finally resolved her eating disorder in her late-20s, her teeth were a constant reminder. At 29, she turned to Viechnicki-Potter. “I was embarrassed, but she put me right at ease,” says the patient, whose smile is now fully restored. “She wasn’t at all judgmental.”

Another of Viechnicki-Potter’s patients was a 37-year-old man who struggled with bulimia. “He never divulged to me how long he’d been doing it, but his teeth eroded down to a mere 4 millimeters,” she says.

After a full mouth reconstruction that included 20 crowns, the length of his new teeth measured a healthy 9.5 millimeters. “I can rehabilitate the mouth of any patient,” she says. “But before I do that, the patient has to make a commitment to make a lifestyle change, and stop what they’re doing and get better.”

Viechnicki-Potter is on the medical committee of A Chance to Heal, a Jenkintown-based group established to prevent eating disorders through education and advocacy. She speaks to children and adults at schools and hospitals about eating disorders and their devastating effect on teeth. “I feel responsible to do what I can to help prevent others from going through it,” she says.

To learn more, visit maryvsmiles.com.

Dr. Mary Viechnicki-Potter

