

City People

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Nilly Barr

*Therapist wants to
change perceptions of
healthy body image*

By Donna Isbell Walker

City People writer

dwalker@greenvilleonline.com

Society's recent emphasis on exercise and healthy nutrition is a good thing, says Nilly Barr, but the downside is that it can mask or even encourage eating disorders.

Barr is a psychotherapist, and after a quarter-century as a counselor, she has seen countless women struggle with their weight and eating habits to the point that their lives are defined by numbers: pounds, calories, fat grams, minutes of exercise.

One of Barr's goals is to help women build a healthier relationship with food and their own bodies. One way she does that is through photo-



Nilly Barr is a psychotherapist in Greenville. DONNA ISBELL WALKER/STAFF

Therapist wants to change body image perceptions

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graphs of how beauty standards have shifted over the centuries, from well-rounded beauties in Renaissance art to the Marilyn Monroe hourglass to ultra-thin supermodels of recent years.

"I wanted young people and everyone else to see how insane this model is, that we are supposed to change our natural body to fit whatever society has now decided is the standard of beauty," says Barr.

That simple demonstration has evolved into an art exhibit called "Body Lines: A Retrospective Look at the 'Perfect' Female Form," on display during March at Coffee Underground.

Barr is one of the founders of ED Aware, a group of mental health professionals focused on spreading awareness about eating disorders, which is presenting the exhibit.

"We wanted to do some community efforts and educate our community locally about body image, about these unrealistic expectations and standards that we have and, hopefully, reduce all the disordered eating," Barr says.

And, Barr says, to let people know about the resources available to help people who are dealing with these issues.

The idea behind "Body Lines" is to encourage women to "stop playing that game because the cost is too high; people are dying, and relationships are suffering. People's purpose in life and their self-esteem and who they are and how they live their lives, the price tag keeps going higher and higher," Barr says.

An eating disorder doesn't always manifest itself as anorexia or bulimia; there's a spectrum



Nilly Barr is a co-founder of ED Aware, a group that raises awareness of eating disorders

DONNA ISBELL WALKER/STAFF

PROFILE

Name: Nilly Barr

Education: Bachelor of science in human services and master of science in counseling psychology, both from University of Tennessee

Family: Husband, Terry; daughters, Pari, 23, and Layla, 18

Interests: Meditation, yoga, bicycling

You can go: "Body Lines: A Retrospective Look at the 'Perfect' Female Form," will be on display throughout the month of March at Coffee Underground. Admission is free.

that starts with "disordered eating." That includes behaviors such as over-exercising, drastically reducing food intake to make up for overeating, pre-occupation with food and calories, and can extend to full-blown disorders, Barr says.

"Many start the day thinking, 'OK, however my weight is or however I think my weight is, is going to determine what kind of day I have. I'm good today, I'm not good today.' The more you go from normal healthy eating toward the illness of it, the more you move on that continuum, the more everything is contingent on it," she says.

In addition to the art exhibit, there will be a reception and panel dis-

cussion on eating disorders March 21 at Coffee Underground, as well as an applied theater workshop on body image March 10 at Warehouse Theatre.

Barr has been in practice for 25 years, but throughout her college years, she struggled with exactly what career path she wanted to follow.

"I always knew that I wanted to help people, but I've always been a very practical person, in my view very pragmatic in my decisions," Barr says. "I wanted to make sure I was going to be able to be independent, stand on my own feet, not depend on a man to support me. In college, I tried everything else: computer science, broadcasting. ... I was trying to

figure out a more practical way because everybody knows you don't make money helping people."

It took a suggestion from a professor at University of Tennessee for Barr to expand her horizons, and she ended up majoring in human services.

Realizing that she could blend her passion with her pragmatism was an important moment for Barr, and it's something she tries to help her counseling clients understand as well.

"I'm always talking about balance with people. It's been such a deep thing for me, and I try to live it and teach it and guide people. That was the struggle. In undergraduate school, I was struggling with how do I balance my passion with my practical needs. And it took a couple of wise people to guide me, and fortunately, while I can be stubborn, I'm not that stubborn. I listened to wisdom. So they helped me find a way to balance the two, and it's worked really well for me."