

School Setting: Eating Disorders

Handout for Parents and Caregivers



Eating disorders are complex illnesses impacted by genetic, biological, psychological and socio-cultural factors. An eating disorder is characterised by abnormal eating and/or exercise behaviours and a preoccupation with body weight or shape.

Eating disorders are not a lifestyle choice, a diet gone wrong or a cry for attention. Eating disorders can take many different forms and interfere with a person's day to day life.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) recognises four eating disorders:

- Anorexia Nervosa
- Bulimia Nervosa
- Binge Eating Disorder
- Other Specified Feeding or Eating Disorders

Research is yet to identify a single cause explaining why some people develop an eating disorder. It is much more likely that some people have personal characteristics that make them vulnerable to developing an eating disorder and that the experience of specific life events then trigger the onset of illness. Once the illness is triggered, the resulting changes in thinking can act to maintain the disorder.

Signs & Symptoms

- Constant or repetitive dieting (e.g. calorie counting, fasting, skipping meals, avoidance of certain foods)
- Changes in food preferences (e.g. sudden dislike of previously enjoyed foods, removal of food groups from diet)
- Social withdrawal or isolation from friends
- Sudden weight loss or frequent changes in weight
- Depression or anxiety, irritability
- Evidence of binge eating (e.g. disappearance of large amounts of food from pantry, large amounts of wrappers and containers discarded in the bin)
- Evidence of vomiting (frequent trips to the bathrooms at or around meals)
- Excessive or compulsive exercise patterns (e.g. exercising when injured or in bad weather, exhibiting distress when unable to exercise).

Where to Get Help

Full recovery and a return to health is possible and more readily achieved the earlier support and treatment is offered. For this reason, we encourage you to visit your GP as soon as possible if you suspect your loved one may be struggling with disordered eating or an eating disorder.

For information and support online, we recommend the following:

Butterfly Foundation National Helpline: 1800 33 4673 For anyone seeking information and support around eating disorders and body image issues.
Eheadsace: www.eheadsace.org.au Eheadsace offers support and advice from trained counsellors to help anyone 12-25 years old work through anything that is bothering them.
InsideOut Institute's National Treatment Database: https://insideoutinstitute.org.au/treatment-services InsideOut's Treatment Services Database can assist you in finding a private practitioner, community clinic or program, day program, in hospital treatment, support group or clinical supervisor near you.

How Can I Best Support My Child?

Everyone experiencing an eating disorder will find different things helpful and unhelpful. It is important to talk to your loved one about what might be the most helpful in supporting them towards health. Below is a list of some common helpful and unhelpful things to say and do. However, it is important to note that this will not be relevant to everyone.

Unhelpful: "Just eat!"

This reinforces that you have little understanding of the person's illness and how difficult it is to overcome. Always remember that eating a meal is their phobia.

Helpful: "Why don't you try to take a few more bites? I can see that this is a struggle for you, but we're trying to get you to a safe place."

This provides encouragement and support, but still allows the person to make their own decision.

Unhelpful: "Where is the loaf of bread I bought? Did you binge again?"

It can be frustrating when food disappears, but it is important to acknowledge the shame and guilt felt by people who binge. Try not to blame them for their behaviours and rather acknowledge that it represents a much bigger internal struggle.

Helpful: "I've noticed food disappearing and wondered how I can help? Are you struggling? Would you like to talk about it?"

Bringing usually occurs to distract or numb the individual from emotional pain. Encourage the person to talk about their struggles and problem solve.

Unhelpful: "You better eat your meal otherwise I'll be really upset with you." "If you don't finish your meal, we'll need to go to hospital."

Refrain from making threats and taking an authoritative stance. This will only alienate the person.

Helpful: "I know how hard this is for you, but finishing your meal will be a great step towards getting better and showing the eating disorder that you are in charge."

This puts the control and power in the hands of your loved one and links it to their goals. It can also provide hope.

Educating yourself about the illness can help you support a person with an eating disorder, take care of yourself and learn about other people's experiences. Here are some websites you may find useful:

- InsideOut Institute for Eating Disorders: www.insideoutinstitute.org.au
 - Online Self-Help Program for Carers <https://insideoutinstitute.org.au/resource-library/supported>
- Eating Disorder Families Australia (EDFA): www.edfa.org.au
- Butterfly Foundation: www.butterfly.org.au
- NEDC: www.nedc.com.au