

Maryland School Mental Health Alliance*

Eating Disorders in Children and Adolescents Information for Parents and Caregivers

Definition

An *Eating Disorder* is a psychological condition that manifests itself in unhealthy eating habits. There are four diagnoses which are characterized by specific behaviors exhibited by the individual. Two primary behaviors are:

Binging: is the consumption of a large amount of food in a short period of time.

Purging: often refers to self-induced vomiting; misuse of laxative, diet pills, or water pills are also considered purging.

Bulimia Nervosa is the most common of the four diagnoses. It is characterized by a preoccupation with food and weight, binging and a compensation for binging by purging, excessive exercise or fasting. This pattern is accompanied by shame and secrecy.

Anorexia Nervosa is characterized by a refusal to maintain a normal weight for one's height, body type, age, and activity level; intense fear of becoming "fat" or gaining weight (extreme concern over one's weight); body image misperception; and loss of menstrual periods in females.

Binge Eating Disorder is characterized by binging, feelings of shame and self-hatred associated with binging, but no compensatory behavior such as purging.

Eating Disorders Not Otherwise Specified: covers all maladaptive eating behaviors that do not fit into the above diagnoses, examples include; restricting food intake, meeting some but not all of the requirements for the above diagnoses, chewing food and spitting it out, or binging and purging irregularly.

Why do we care?

- Of the currently more than 10 million Americans afflicted with eating disorders, 90 percent are children and adolescents.
- The average age of eating disorders onset has dropped from 13-17 to 9-12.
- The number of males with eating disorders has doubled during the past decade.

Children with an eating disorder may:

- Exhibit low-self esteem and a poor body image.
- Be prone to mood swings, perfectionism, and depression.
- Suffer from many physical problems such as:
 - Excessive weight loss
 - Irregularity or absence of menstruation in females
 - Hair loss
 - Severe digestive system problems
 - Damaged vital organs
 - Tooth and gum problems
 - Swollen salivary glands due to induced vomiting

- General malnutrition
- Dehydration
- Thinning of the bones resulting in osteoporosis or osteopenia
- Struggle in their relationships with their family and friends.
- Perform poorly in their academic performance.

What can we do about it?

- **Build children's self-esteem based on their positive traits.** Be as supportive and encouraging as you can in raising children. Also, always try to highlight the positive points of their personalities and praise them for their good behaviors.
- **Serve as a healthy role model for your children.** Do not diet; the key to developing a healthy life style is to practice moderation both in eating and exercising.
- **Construct a healthy relationship with food.** Make the meal time a fun time by gathering all family members together and enjoying a variety of healthy foods. Never turn a meal time into a power struggle between you and your child by rewarding or punishing him/her for his/her behavior with food.
- **Teach your children to respect the differences in body structures and feel good about their appearances.** Parents should avoid labeling their children regarding their weight, and they should further steer clear of commenting about other people's weight and appearance as an indicator of their character and personality. Not all people should resemble the thin models and movie stars that are portrayed in the media, so parents need to teach children that everyone is born with a unique body shape which is mostly influenced by heredity.
- **Watch for warning signs.** If you notice a change in your child's dietary behavior such as anxiety around mealtime, avoidance of social situations involving food, food rituals, visiting the bathroom soon after meals, rapid fluctuation in weight, overeating or hoarding it is a good idea to seek the advice of a therapist or doctor.
- **Take care of yourself.** A battle with an eating disorder can be long and difficult, especially for parents. Do not blame yourself, if you begin to feel overwhelmed it is wise to seek professional help. Remember, you cannot help your child without being healthy yourself.

Key Resources & Links

American Psychiatric Association: Common Questions about Eating Disorders

<http://healthyminds.org/expertopinion9.cfm>

Anorexia Nervosa and Related Eating Disorders Inc.'s website provides great tips for parents to promote healthy eating habits in their household. This organization also gives advice to parents whose children are currently fighting a battle with an eating disorder.

<http://www.anred.com/prev.html>

<http://www.anred.com/pnp.html>

The Empowered Parents website is a useful resource for statistics, articles, and treatment/coping strategies for parents of children with eating disorders. This site also includes a site for kids and letters from other parents who have questions about eating disorders.

<http://www.empoweredparents.com/>

KidsHealth for Parents

http://www.kidshealth.org/parent/nutrition_fit/nutrition/eating_disorders.html

National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders

<http://www.anad.org>

Ten Things Parents Can Do to Prevent Eating Disorders (National Eating Disorders Association)

http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/p.asp?WebPage_ID=286&Profile_ID=41171

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