

Eating Disorders



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What are Eating Disorders?

No two of us are the same. We vary tremendously in shape, size and in our eating habits.

The point at which our size or eating behaviour becomes a concern, a health issue or a practical problem is always difficult to define.

This is an area which requires tremendous sensitivity on the part of Leaders. Consider for a minute how sensitive you are about how this issue concerns you!

Obesity

Clinical obesity is often derived from a Body Mass Index (BMI) exceeding 30kg/m and is characterised by excess body fat. The causes of obesity can be partly genetic and partly related to diet, age and activity level. Some drugs or other medical conditions may cause obesity but this is rare in young people.

Obesity is increasing worldwide and is becoming the world's biggest health problem. Recent reports suggest that it may soon overtake cigarette smoking as a serious health risk. Long-term obesity is a risk factor for developing several chronic diseases including diabetes and hypertension.

How Does This Affect Young People?

Most obese young people are well aware of the limitations that their size imposes on them. Many of them will have encountered bullying or teasing as a result of being overweight and may have reacted by becoming reclusive, withdrawn and less willing to participate. Alternatively

young people may react by being moody, argumentative or exhibiting bullying behaviour themselves.

Overweight young people may have been denied access to activities or recreation as a result of their size, for example theme parks, canoeing or abseiling. They may suffer knock on effects as a result of their weight and be restricted by joint and muscle pain or be short of breath during exercise.

Practical Tips

Be sensitive to young people who appear to be overweight. Appreciate how they may feel about their size and other aspects of their life that may be affected by their size.

Try and ensure that other young people do not tease, bully or pick on overweight young people.

Be prepared to listen to young people voicing their worries about obesity and weight concerns. If necessary direct them to where they may seek help - school nurse, doctors or self help groups.

Try and anticipate activities or events that may prove difficult for overweight young people to participate in and discuss this with the young people and / or their parents as appropriate.

Avoid making personal comments or suggesting 'diet tips' as this may prove very offensive.

Be aware of inappropriate behaviour patterns that may result from the young person's obesity where they may be a victim or perpetrator.

Be aware that young people develop, grow and change shape at different stages. Those

appearing slightly overweight may well lose any excess as they grow.

Bulimia and Anorexia Nervosa

Bulimia and Anorexia Nervosa are eating disorders. They are medical conditions that are characterised by an intense preoccupation with body weight and shape. People suffering from Anorexia will restrict their food intake to minimal level in order to lose and maintain a low weight. People suffering from Bulimia have episodes of uncontrolled overeating followed by induced episodes of vomiting. The two behaviours may alternate in the same individual. People with Bulimia Nervosa may be of normal weight. Both behaviours may be difficult to identify, as people may be extremely secretive about their eating behaviour.

90% of people with Bulimia Nervosa and Anorexia Nervosa are women. Around 0.5% of adolescent women have Anorexia Nervosa and 1% has Bulimia Nervosa.

There are often complex social and psychological reasons underlying eating disorders. It can be very difficult to fully understand and help young people with eating disorders as there is no single 'cause' and many factors may play a part.

Many young people will experiment with diets in an attempt to lose weight. These may be perfectly safe short-term diets or can become very restrictive and long term. Dieting in itself does not mean that a young person has an eating disorder but in some cases dieting can be a precursor to developing an eating disorder. It is important to keep some perspective regarding dieting.

Practical Tips

Try to provide balanced healthy meals with some choice when catering for young people.

Don't be alarmed if young people talk about diets or refuse to eat certain foods at events.

Try not to make an issue about somebody's eating habits.

Be prepared to listen to young people voice their concerns about diet, body weight, etc.

If you have concerns regarding a young person's eating habits, it may be appropriate to consider having a sensitive chat with their parents or carers.

Further Information

BBC Online: Eating Disorders

Part of the BBC's Health site, with user-friendly advice and information about eating disorders. www.bbc.co.uk/health/conditions/mental_health/

Eating Disorders Association

Eating Disorders Association
103 Prince of Wales Road
Norwich
NR1 1DW
Adult Helpline: 0845 634 1414 (Over 18 years of age)
Email: helpmail@edauk.com
Youthline: 0845 634 7650 (Up to and including 18 years of age)
Email: talkback@edauk.com
Text message: 07977 493 345
Web site: www.edauk.com

TheSite

A website for young people produced by YouthNet UK, a small registered charity. It's designed to connect young adults in the UK to the best information, help and advice available, so they can make informed decisions. It has useful sections on eating disorders.
Web site: www.thesite.org.uk

YoungMinds

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