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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.

What is an eating disorder?

An eating disorder can be anything from anorexia, bulimia, selective eating or laxative abuse. It is a mental health problem where a person has a fear of gaining weight, think they weigh too much, or are not happy with how they look.

Eating disorders often start with the person feeling 'dissatisfied' with their weight or figure, leading to an increase in exercise or dieting, but progresses to altered thought patterns and behaviour changes.

Who is prone to it?

Eating disorders aren't genetic, and no-one in particular is prone to it. However, recent studies show that teenage girls are more prone to eating disorders, people having life problems in general or people with a history of dieting. Even though research does suggest that teenage girls are more prone to eating disorders, concerns over Male

Types of eating disorder

Anorexia

Anorexia is when someone doesn't eat or hardly eats at all. People suffering from Anorexia will restrict their food intake to minimal level in order to loose and maintain a low weight

Bulimia

People suffering from Bulimia have episodes of uncontrolled overeating followed by induced episodes of vomiting. People with Bulimia Nervosa may be of normal weight

Selective eating is when there are certain foods that a person won't eat. This can cause starvation if many foods are avoided.

Not eating certain types of food can be known as **Selective Eating Disorder (SED)**, but this is not a problem if it is just the odd item or something a person simply does not like. If it is many things the person refuses to eat this can become a problem, as they might not be eating enough. Generally, this is nothing to worry about as it is usually a childhood phase, but if it becomes more sustained it can lead to negative effects in emotional, physical or mental development.

Laxative abuse is when a person eats normally but takes laxatives so the food isn't digested properly and leaves the body prematurely.

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.

Why do people do it?

The cause of eating disorders is largely unknown, despite over 50 years of research. It may be completely in the mind; a person might look in a mirror and not be happy with their figure, thinking they are fat when actually they are very thin. It also has a relationship to the social circle, certain personality traits or even reading fashion magazines.

What can be done to help?

If you know someone who has an eating disorder, or you think they have an eating disorder, you can tell any responsible adult and they would help you find help for that person, even if that is just counselling or a friendly chat.

If someone has an eating disorder, the signs they might show are:

- excessive weight loss or weight fluctuations
- unusual eating habits, like taking small bites
- the person might stop eating around people and have secretive behaviour
- use of laxatives or diet pills

- food disappearing
- lots of obsessive exercise
- poor condition of hair and nails
- dental cavities or gum disease
- extreme sensitivity to cold
- fine body hair on arms or legs
- distorted body image; they might genuinely see themselves as fat, even if they are thin

Other symptoms may be a sign of an eating disorder, but may be symptoms of other things. It is still worth telling another adult or professional if a person shows any of these symptoms:

- gets irritated easily
- depression
- low self esteem
- talk of suicide
- drug or alcohol abuse.

What are the signs of an eating disorder?

It is very difficult to detect something like this because there is no obvious cause for it. But if you know someone is trying to lose weight, be aware if it seems as though they are taking it too far, not eating balanced meals three times a day, it seems like they are exercising too much, extreme dieting or forming any strange habits around eating.

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.
- 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 young people with an eating disorder
- 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.
- 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.

Who can help?

Most people with eating disorders will not tell anyone about their eating habits, or they will refuse help, as they might not understand their behaviour. There are, however, many help associations that can give advice and support with eating disorders.

www.b-eat.co.uk

www.disordered-eating.co.uk

www.somethingfishy.org

www.eating-disorders.org.uk