

Teaching Students with Eating Disorders

Most students with eating disorders remain for the most part at school. Only those who are seriously at risk physically and/or psychologically are hospitalised. The challenge for those working with the young person is to provide a supportive and safe environment that does not contribute to their obsessive attention to food, weight or body image. It is important to evaluate with them their strengths and limitations, to help them accept these and set realistic goals that will guide them away from perfectionist thinking and behaviour.

Ensure that the young person is involved in any decision making so that they are given as much responsibility as possible for choices. Exercise and sport may require careful observation as over exercising can occur as part of obsessive preoccupation with weight and shape.

Returning to school after hospitalisation can be a particularly difficult time as the expectation is that the young person will now be “better”. It is crucial to remember that recovery is a gradual and often very slow process. Change needs to take place at many levels - physical, psychological and behavioural. The restoration of a healthy weight, for example, will not automatically translate into emotional balance and the giving up of disordered behaviour. Acceptance by parents and teachers/youth workers that recovery is a very gradual process, together with recognition that lapses can and do occur, will help to avoid placing undue stress on the young person.

Adults' Attitudes

It is important that teachers and adults working with young people examine their own attitudes, beliefs, prejudices and behaviours around food, weight, body image, physical appearance, health and exercise.

Questions to consider include:

*Do I inadvertently promote fear of fat in young people by my words or actions?
Am I satisfied with my own size and shape? If not, how does this impact on my own behaviour and on my perception of others?*

Do I make negative comments about other people's size and shape?

*Are there aspects of the school environment that undermine self acceptance?
Am I challenging these?*

Inadvertent, ‘innocent’ comments about shape or weight may contribute to a young person exaggerating the importance of physical appearance in their perception of themselves. This can result in the erosion of self esteem. Low self esteem is considered one of the more significant risk factors for the development of an eating disorder.

Recovery

Eating disorders develop as a means of coping with life and its challenges. It is precisely because the eating disorder serves a very real purpose in the young person's life that it becomes very difficult to stop its progress. The longer it is established, the more it takes on a life of its own and takes over the life of the person affected. Letting go of the eating disorder can take time as it involves developing a different way of engaging with oneself and of responding to life and its challenges. It can only begin with the will to change. It will require commitment and it will take a lot of courage. It cannot be forced. **The journey to recovery will happen in a different way and at a different pace for each individual.** Recovery is greatly enhanced when a person is met with understanding and empathy and is provided with a supportive environment in which to begin to manage and overcome their difficulties in an appropriate and healthful way.

Useful publications and websites

- **i-figure – a mind and body model**, CD-rom produced by Bodywhys (2006) for use in the classroom. Available from Bodywhys.
- **Bodywhys website:** www.bodywhys.ie for information and support.
- **Eating Disorders – Guidance for Teachers**, Family Reading Centre, 126 Sutherland Ave, Biggin Hill, Kent, TN16 3HJ, UK.
- **Resources for Teachers/Schools, “It's not about food ...it's about feelings”** See www.edauk.com.
- **Ministry of Education, Canada:** <http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/specialed/edi/1.htm>
- **Downloadable resource for schools:** <http://eatingdisorders.org.au>

For information and support

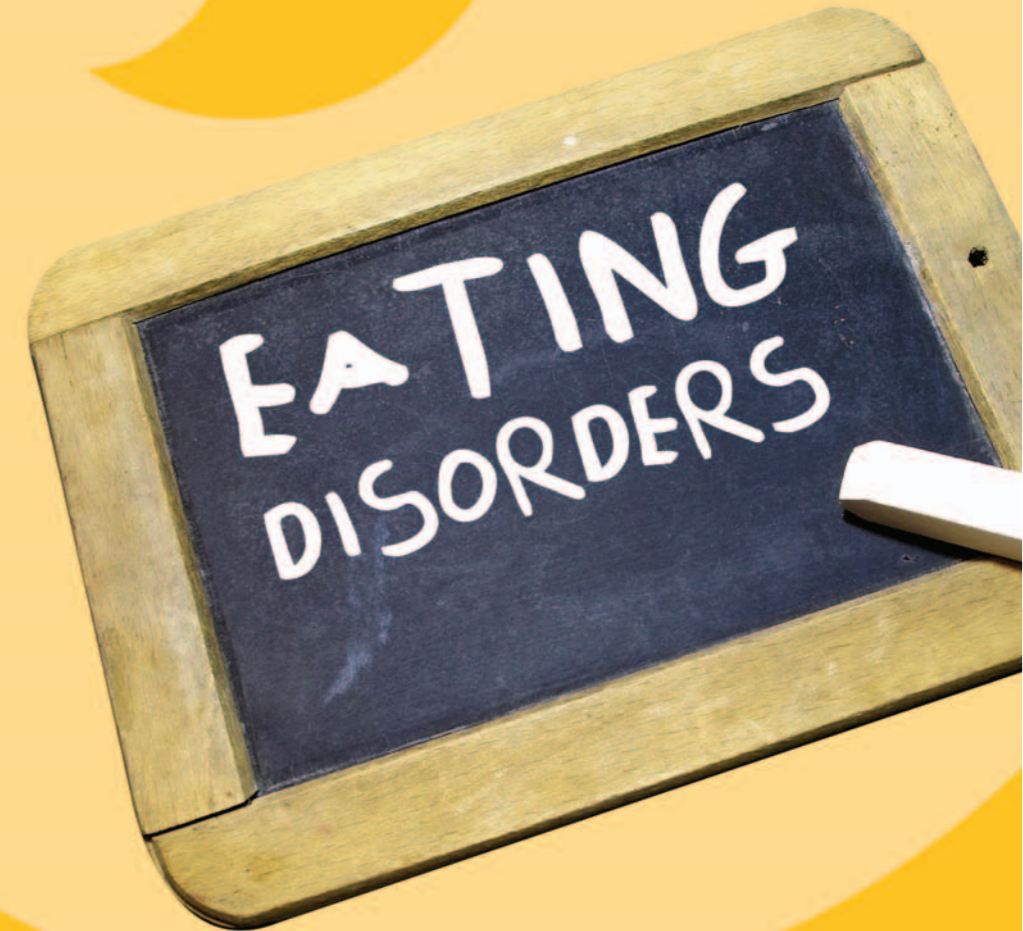
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This leaflet is funded by:
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YOUR CONTRIBUTION CAN HELP US TO CONTINUE TO PROVIDE VITAL SERVICES
TO PEOPLE AFFECTED BY EATING DISORDERS. THANK YOU.**



Information for
Teachers/Youth Workers

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Eating disorders are very complex conditions which can be fatal if left untreated. Given the prevalence of eating disorders among adolescents and young adults, as well as the increasing numbers of younger children presenting with eating disorders, it is essential you educate yourself as much as possible about eating disorders.

Eating disorders can be seen as a way of coping with unmanageable feelings and as a symptom of underlying emotional distress. It is important that this is recognised and that your focus is directed towards how the young person is feeling rather than on issues relating more particularly to food and weight.

Eating disorders affect both males and females and the age of onset is often during adolescence. Schools and youth centres can therefore be actively involved in identifying and supporting a young person through an eating disorder. As a teacher or youth worker, you are strategically placed to recognise potential problems. It is important that you have an awareness of the issues involved so that you can provide a supportive environment for the young person in distress and also determine what action needs to be taken.

Eating disorders can lead to physical, psychological and emotional consequences for the young person involved and can be difficult for all those who are trying to help.

Eating disorders are potentially life threatening and should always be taken seriously. However, with appropriate help and support, most people recover from an eating disorder. In your supporting/helping role, it is essential that you maintain a strong belief in recovery. Believing in a person's capacity to recover and communicating this belief to them will contribute positively to your efforts to support them.

Identifying young people who are at risk

The main eating disorders are [Anorexia Nervosa](#), [Bulimia Nervosa](#) and [Binge Eating Disorder](#). (Fact sheets on each of these topics are available from www.bodywhys.ie or by contacting the Bodywhys office).

Informing yourself sufficiently about eating disorders is the first step towards being able to provide effective support. Remain mindful that every person's experience of an eating disorder is unique. Most peoples' experience does not reflect neatly the diagnostic criteria of any one eating disorder.

Early intervention in an eating disorder greatly improves the outcome.

Warning signs may include weight loss (or other significant changes in weight), changes in personality, withdrawal from friends and/or from activities, any signs that might be indicative of emotional overwhelm, changes in academic performance, skipping lunch or visiting the bathroom after lunch. Any combination of these signs should be taken seriously. More information about the signs and symptoms of eating disorders are listed in our fact sheets on anorexia, bulimia and binge eating disorder.

Eating disorders develop over time as a result of many different and complex factors including biological, psychological, familial, and socio-cultural factors (see fact sheet [About Eating Disorders](#)).

Young people are particularly vulnerable to the influence of the media and to prevalent cultural attitudes concerning body shape. Although the media and other cultural influences do not cause eating disorders, they can contribute to a complex of factors that can increase vulnerability to an eating disorder. Recent studies have shown that dissatisfaction with weight and shape is very common among pre-adolescent and adolescent girls and increasingly among boys. This dissatisfaction can translate into behaviours that can lead to eating disorders. For this reason, media awareness can play an important part in equipping a young person to view critically and challenge the messages presented to them by the media (see [i-figure](#), CD-rom produced by Bodywhys for use in the classroom).

What should you do if you are concerned about a potential eating disorder?

There is a possibility that the young person and even parents will react negatively to any suggestion of an eating disorder. Denial that there is a problem is often the first response. Therefore, concerned teachers/youth workers are advised to keep clear, concise accounts of the incidents and behaviours that have led them to believe that there is a problem. This will give you concrete information to help you present your concerns.

You should not attempt to "diagnose" but your careful observations may assist in any assessment and diagnostic process further down the road.

It is also important that you share your concerns, in confidence, with the school counsellor or the person concerned with pastoral care in the school/youth centre. You can then decide together who is the most appropriate person to approach the young person and his/her family. Be sure to clarify the school's/ youth centre's policy around making contact with parents and refer to any existing policies around duty of care for young people.

Talking to a young person that you suspect may have an eating disorder

Arrange to talk to the person in private and with plenty of time to avoid feeling rushed. Be sure to communicate care and concern, using phrases like "I am concerned about you because lately you seem unhappy/sad/preoccupied/anxious/tired..." Communicate in a direct and non-judgemental way the specific incidents or behaviours that have given rise to your concern, i.e. "I have noticed you often throw out your lunch/ often visit the bathroom after meals". If appropriate, state that the young person should seek help and outline what help is available to them. Provide them with helpful information about eating disorders and support services but do not force it on them.

Listen to what they say without interruption and without making any judgements. They may deny there is a problem or become upset. Remain calm and reflect back to them what they have said to make sure that they feel that their thoughts and feelings have been heard accurately. Do not use scare tactics, get into a power struggle or prolong a conversation that is going badly. Restate the view that they should talk to someone with expertise in eating disorders. Decide with them what will happen next. It may be that their parents need to be informed. It is important not to make any promises that cannot be kept, such as promising not to tell anyone. Explain any confidentiality and reporting issues arising from any Child Protection Policy your organisation may have.

Help them to explore what supports are available to them and how they might go about accessing these supports.

When talking to parents it is important to indicate your concern for the welfare of the young person and to emphasise the specific incidents that have aroused your concerns. State the importance of obtaining an assessment by a health professional and that seeking help early greatly improves the chances of a successful outcome. Have information to hand in order to be able to signpost parents to information, support and treatment services.

Friends may be the first to draw attention to a fellow student. Ask them to describe what they have observed or heard their friend say. Discuss with them whether or not they wish you to disclose that they have told you. Reassure them that they did the right thing by talking to you and tell them what you intend to do with the information you have been entrusted with. If appropriate, let them know that you will talk to their friend. Signpost them to information that will support them.

Further suggestions on approaching a person can be found in the [Supporting Someone](#) section of our website ([Friends, Family, Carers – Approaching Someone](#)) or can be obtained as a fact sheet from our central office.