

Guidelines for School Staff

Helping a Student with a Suspected Eating Disorder

Disordered eating is common among youth, with 49% of youth in grade 7-12 reporting skipping meals for health or weight reasons (OSDUHS Mental Health and Well-Being Report, 2023). This behaviour can go unnoticed by adults for many years, increasing the risk of an eating disorder developing. Schools are often the first place where concerning behaviour is identified.

The longer the disordered eating goes unnoticed, the greater the potential for it to develop into an eating disorder (e.g. anorexia or bulimia) and the longer it takes to recover. Early detection of disordered eating symptoms and accessing treatment are critical to positive outcomes. Eating disorders are serious, life-threatening mental illnesses with both physical and psychological symptoms.

Disordered eating and eating disorders do not discriminate. They affect all genders, body sizes, ethnicities, and sexual orientations. Staff should be aware that the student and/or the family might not recognize a problem or be willing to accept help. Denial is a common symptom of eating disorders.

Signs and Symptoms of Disordered Eating

The greater the number of symptoms present, the greater the risk:

- Fainting, dizziness, light headedness, low energy.
- Changes in weight (increases or decreases) - disordered eating and eating disorders exist among all body shapes and sizes, not just smaller bodies.
- Preoccupation with body and/or weight.
- Reduced concentration, memory and cognitive ability.
- Mood changes – withdrawn, quiet, unhappy, irritable.
- Depression, anxiety, social isolation, and loneliness.
- Unusual eating rituals or changes in eating.
- Drinking excessive amounts of water and/or other beverages.
- Frequent trips to the bathroom.
- Excessive exercise.
- Decline in school attendance.
- Perfectionism (e.g. towards schoolwork, extracurriculars, self-identity).
- Skipping meals and/or won't eat with others.

TAKE ACTION!

Consult with a school counsellor or administrator if you see the signs and symptoms.



Talking to a Student Showing Signs and Symptoms of Disordered Eating

The goal of the discussion with the student is NOT to provide a diagnosis but rather:

- To listen, to express concern for the student's overall health and well-being, and to gain an understanding of the student's perspective.
- To demonstrate warmth, compassion, and care without judgement.
- To encourage and support the student in involving the student's parents/guardians.
- To emphasize the importance of seeking medical care as soon as possible.
- To not comment on the student's weight loss or appearance.

Goals of informing the parent(s) / guardian(s)

- To share with parents your concerns regarding the student's health and well-being.
- To support parents in accessing medical care and resources to help their child.

Inform parents that you are concerned the student may be at risk of disordered eating. Tell parents that the earlier treatment begins, the better the chances are for a successful recovery.



Next Steps

Refer to services such as:

- The school's administration or guidance counsellor can help the student find resources and make referrals.
- The student's family physician or a community physician/nurse practitioner.
- Visit the NEDIC website for tips and suggestions on how to support a student who is currently receiving treatment.

Resources

- National Eating Disorder Information Centre (NEDIC)
- Bulimia Anorexia Nervosa Association (BANA Southwest Ontario)
- Eating Disorders Ontario (Training, Treatment and Prevention)
- Overview of Disordered Eating Prevention: How can schools help?