

Eating disorders – spotting the signs

I was recently lucky enough to attend a full day’s staff training with **BEAT** – the UK’s leading eating disorder charity. The training focused on spotting the early signs of an eating disorder alongside how best to support students with eating disorders in school. I thought it would be beneficial to inform parents of some of these first signs and also signpost services that can offer support to staff, parents and students alike.

What is an eating disorder?

Eating disorders are complex mental illnesses. Anyone, no matter what their age, gender, or background, can develop one. Some examples of eating disorders include bulimia, binge eating disorder, and anorexia. There’s no single cause and people might not have all symptoms for any one eating disorder.

| Anorexia | Bulimia | Binge eating disorder (BED) |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persistent restriction of energy intake leading to extreme weight loss • Intense fear of weight gain | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequent episodes of binge eating followed by compensatory behaviours (purging) to avoid weight gain • Often manage to maintain a healthy weight • Purging can involve vomiting, restricting food, laxatives, excessive exercise. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • During a binge much more food is consumed than when a person without an eating disorder overindulges – not the same as having a takeaway on a Friday night. • Binge’s can involve feeling ‘disassociated’ – some say they don’t realise what they’re doing • Often involves foods normally avoided and can be 1000’s of calories • Feel a lack of control – large amounts of food over a short time period • The key difference to bulimia is people with BED don’t take other measures to prevent weight gain. Weight gain is inevitable in BED sufferers. |

Spotting the signs

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low self-confidence/self-esteem • Restricting food or developing rituals around food e.g. cutting into small pieces, refusing to eat in front of others, only eating at specific times, weighing food • Compulsive, excessive or obsessive exercise • Perfectionist traits • Constant comparison with others • Avoiding social situations like family meals out • Potential fluctuation in weight or weight loss | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Going to the toilet after meals • Bingeing food • Tiredness • Bloating • Gastrointestinal problems e.g. constipation • Irregular or stopped periods in girls/women • Embarrassment or guilt around foods • Changes in mood • Spoiling food on purpose e.g. covering it in salt |
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How can we help?

Many of the suggestions below are simply ‘good practice’ in day-to-day life, and should be put in place regardless of whether or not you know someone with an eating disorder.

- **Avoid talking negatively about food** – e.g. referring to cake as ‘naughty’ or saying you’re being ‘bad’ for eating something. This reinforces the belief with others that food is good vs. bad and that ‘bad’ foods should be avoided when in reality there are no ‘bad’ foods – food doesn’t have a moral value!
- **Educate on the importance of making social media a positive space** – encourage individuals to only follow accounts that make them feel good about themselves! Get them to download Apps like Headspace or Kooth that can promote positive mental health.
- **Avoid commenting on people’s weight or what they’re eating** – 85% of people with an eating disorder maintain a healthy weight and therefore commenting that someone’s ‘lost weight recently’ or saying how great they look now they’re lost weight could reaffirm their unhealthy relationship with food.

- **Approach someone** – Asking someone if they're ok is a really good place to start if you suspect they might have an unhealthy relationship with food. Make sure you're informed and do it in private, without using accusatory language.
- **Never assume** – never assume that because someone is a healthy weight then they must be OK. Don't assume that an eating disorder is the preserve of a young woman, ¼ of sufferers are suspected to be male and BEAT are currently taking the most calls on their helplines from individuals aged 40+, many of whom have been suffering in silence for years.

Guides to help if you suspect someone you know might have an eating disorder:

<https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/uploads/documents/2018/5/carers-booklet-1.pdf>

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/eating-problems/for-friends-family/#.XJ4pZD-Nzcs>

Where can you find extra information?

- <https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/>
- <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Eating-disorders/>

Where can you go to access support?

- Visit a GP
- BEAT have a variety of support services including web chats, helplines, online guides and online support groups - <https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/support-services>

Recommended reading

'Just Eat It' by Laura Thomas PHD – ***“Just Eat It isn't just a book. It's part of a movement to help us take back control over our bodies. To free us from restrictive dieting, disordered eating and punishing exercise. To reject the guilt and anxiety associated with eating and, ultimately, to help us feel good about ourselves.”***

'Body Positive Power' by Megan Crabbe – ***“With her inimitable flair and whip-smart wit, Megan argues for a new way of seeing ourselves, and a world where everybody is celebrated. Where there is no such thing as a 'bikini body diet' and 97% of women don't hate the way they look.”***