

How to Help Someone with an Eating Disorder

Eating disorders pose a serious health risk to our society. Currently it is estimated that 90% of people with an eating disorder are women; however, it appears the number of men with an eating disorder is increasing. Although it is difficult to determine exact numbers, it is estimated that 1 out of every 100 women under the age of 20 has Anorexia; and 4 out of every 100 women of college age has Bulimia. Left untreated approximately 20% of the people with an eating disorder will eventually die as a result. Unfortunately, it is very rare that someone with an eating disorder will seek help without the caring intervention of family or friends. Please take a moment to read the following to see if you may be able to help someone with an eating disorder.

How can I tell if someone has an eating disorder?

The three most common types of eating disorders are Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia Nervosa and Binge Eating Disorder. Some of the warning signs are:

Anorexia Nervosa is characterized by extreme efforts to lose weight by severely restricting food intake and/or compulsive use of exercise. Behaviorally, someone with Anorexia will often want to be left alone, will wear baggy clothes, will view themselves as being overweight despite being obviously thin, may have mood swings, and will seem to have a high need of being in control of their circumstances.

Bulimia Nervosa is characterized by periods of uncontrolled eating (binges), followed by activities to rid the body of food (purging) by self-induced vomiting and/or use of laxatives and diuretics. Someone with Bulimia may have a sore throat, swollen glands, mouth infections, sensitive or damaged teeth, will feel ashamed, depressed and guilty, and be highly secretive about their purging.

Binge Eating Disorder is characterized by periods of uncontrolled eating, but without the purging activities mentioned above. Someone with Binge Eating Disorder will gain weight, be secretive about their eating, and often appear depressed.

It should be emphasized that the above information is *not* an exhaustive list of the characteristics of an eating disorder. Instead, it is intended to give a general idea of the traits of an eating disorder. If you are concerned that someone you care about may be struggling with an eating disorder, please visit the National Institute of Mental Health website (www.NIMH.NIH.gov) and click on "eating disorders" for more information.

What are the causes of an eating disorder?

According to the National Eating Disorder Association (NEDA), (http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/p.asp?WebPage_ID=337), there is no simple answer that covers everyone. However, there are a number of risk factors for the development of an eating disorder. The greater number of risk factors present increases the likelihood of a person developing an eating disorder. Such as:

Family Issues: Conflicts with parents about weight, eating and diets; rivalry and/or criticism among siblings about weight, shape and appearance; history of physical or sexual abuse.

Psychological Issues: Low self-esteem, feelings of inadequacy or of a lack of control in life; depression, anxiety, anger or loneliness.

Cultural Factors: Social pressures that glorify thin women and muscular men: media images that portray heroines as thin, toned and beautiful; heroes as trained athletes, and villains as physically unattractive. The cultural influences start at an extremely early age. For example: If Barbie were an actual woman, she would be six feet tall, weigh 101 pounds and have a *19 inch waist!* If GI Joe were an actual man, he would have a *50 inch chest* and *22 inch biceps!*

What can I do to help?

If you are concerned that someone you care about may have an eating disorder, you have already taken an important step by reading this article! Remember, someone with an eating disorder will tend to avoid seeking help on their own, so the involvement of friends and family is crucial. NEDA has the following suggestions:

Learn as much as you can about eating disorders. Among other resources, the above links to NEDA and NIMH provide a wealth of information.

Be Honest. Talk openly and honestly about your concerns with the person who is struggling.

Be Caring, but Firm. Caring means helping your loved one take responsibility for their actions and the consequences of those actions. Remain connected with them and offer to assist them in getting help.

Compliment your loved one for their personality and all that they have contributed, reminding them that their “true beauty” is in who they are, not how they conform with Madison Avenue’s unrealistic standards for appearance.

Be a Role Model in regard to sensible eating, exercise and self-acceptance.

Tell Someone!!!! Even though it may be difficult to tell someone else about your concerns for your loved one, very often your initiative in exposing the “secret” will open up a world of assistance and support, both for your loved one and for yourself! The Employee Service Program is one resource that you have to confidentially discuss your concerns, and to develop a plan to assist your loved one. Employee Service Program professional counselors are available for confidential assistance to state employees and their families, free of charge, and can be contacted at 517-373-7630 or 1-800-521-1377, Monday through Friday 8:00am – 5:00pm. For more information, visit the ESP web page at www.michigan.gov/esp.

