

Eating Disorders

Everyone needs to eat to survive. Some people, though, overeat or don't eat enough or at all, leading to an eating disorder. There are many underlying causes of eating disorders. Even though we associate eating disorders with adolescents, some children, as young as 5 years old, suffer from these types of behaviors. It isn't always apparent that a student is suffering from an eating disorder because they may "look healthy." Other times, parents or others rationalize the behaviors they are seeing, saying they will "grow out of it", "it's just a phase", or "they are just a picky eater". Others will try to force the student eat which can cause more conflict. As a result, parents and school professionals often struggle to know what to do.

The first challenge is noticing or identifying that a student may be struggling with an eating disorder. It's important to pay attention to warning signs and trust your gut. Some warning signs include changes in behavior around food, physical changes in appearance, what they are focusing on in social media, and the students' comments and beliefs about food or body image.

Once we have identified there is a problem, we need to listen openly to the student. The student needs to feel like they can share their issues with you and that you will not judge them. Your role should be that of a caring adult. By listening, you may find out the cause of the behaviors. Validate their feelings but don't offer solutions immediately. Remember, this is a process.

There are many different types of eating disorders, i.e., anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, binge eating disorder, and avoidant or restrictive food intake disorder, to name a few. Take time to research which disorder the student may be struggling with. Each disorder has different causes as well as different treatment approaches.

Next, seek support from outside sources. An eating disorder is a mental health condition and the student likely needs support in the form of a doctor and/or counselor. A doctor can explain long lasting complications from the eating disorder and help find the best and most healthy solution to reintegrating healthy eating habits. A counselor can help address the mental health struggles the student is experiencing and find appropriate ways to address the stressors with which the student is struggling.

Many students will deny having an eating disorder for a variety of reasons. So, what do you do? First, relay observations you have made of the students' behavior when talking with the student. Some students may deny the problem because they do not think or realize they have a problem. Having evidence to support your concerns may help them see they do have a problem and need help. You should also express concerns you have about the students' health and safety. This can lead into a

discussion about seeing a doctor and counselor. Even if the student does not believe they have a problem, suggest that they visit with a doctor or a counselor, even if it is just to be sure they are doing okay. If the conversation is spinning in circles and you or the student are becoming upset, it is time to end the conversation and return to it later when you are both calmer. Make sure the student knows that your door is always open if they want to talk. Depending on your responsibilities, you should also take any necessary actions. For school personnel, this may include informing and discussing the issue with parents.

Eating disorders in youth are a very serious concern, and can start in youth as young as five years old. These disorders not only stem from mental health issues but can also cause long-term negative effects and disrupt their development. Addressing these issues as soon as possible is our best way to help the student not suffer negative effects. Never ignore or minimize the problem by saying they “just need to eat”. Do not worry that you are “overreacting” because if you have a concern, more than likely you are right. It is better to react to a suspicion and then have it end up not being a concern rather than not doing anything. Taking that first step and trusting your instincts can help the student get the support they need to live a long, healthy life.

References:

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