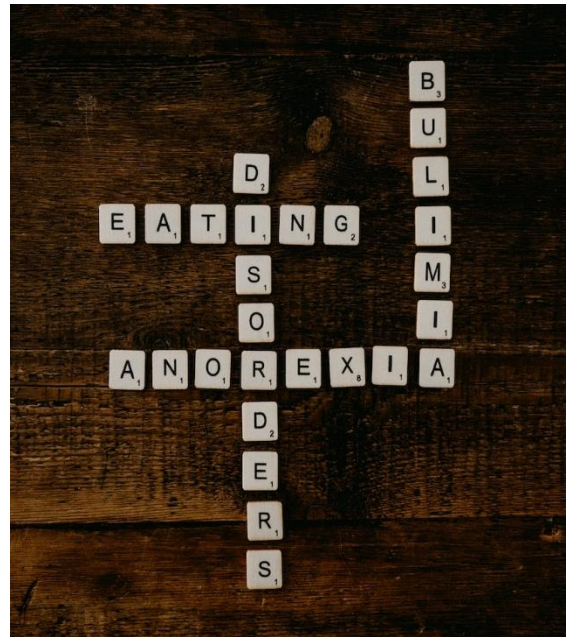


## Eating Disorders: Promoting Healthy Body Image

Eating disorders are serious, but treatable mental and physical illnesses. National surveys estimate that 20 million women and 10 million men will have an eating disorder at some point in their lives (National Eating Disorder Association). While eating disorders can affect people of all ages, the onset of eating disorders typically occurs during pre-adolescence or adolescence. Eating disorders are considered bio-psycho-social diseases, which means that genetic, biological, environmental, and social elements play a role. It is common for eating disorders to co-occur with other mental health conditions like depression, anxiety, social phobia and obsessive-compulsive disorder.



Early intervention can increase the probability of complete recovery. However, many adolescents go undiagnosed and do not receive treatment until their eating disorders are at an advanced state. One reason for this is that teenagers with eating disorders often try to hide their behaviors. Additionally, family and friends may be unaware of the signs and symptoms of an eating disorder. Different types of eating disorders produce different warning signs. Among teenagers, the most common eating disorders include Anorexia, Bulimia, and Binge-Eating Disorder.

Anorexia is characterized by abnormally low body weight, an intense fear of gaining weight, and a distorted perception of weight. Signs of Anorexia include:

- A distorted view of one's body weight
- Restricting, hiding, or discarding food (skipping meals)
- Obsessively counting calories and/or grams of fat
- Denial of feelings of hunger
- Compulsive or excessive exercise
- Pronounced emotional changes, such as irritability, depression, and anxiety
- Social withdrawal
- Physical symptoms such as rapid weight loss, feeling cold, tired, thinning hair or dizziness

Individuals with Bulimia typically binge and purge by engaging in episodes of overeating (bingeing) usually followed by behavior such as purging through vomiting, use of laxatives, fasting or excessive exercise. Teens with Bulimia may go unnoticed due to the ability to maintain a "normal" body weight. Signs of Bulimia may include:

- Preoccupation with body weight and distorted body image
- Eating unusually large amounts of food with no apparent change in weight
- Hiding food or discarded food containers and wrappers
- Excessive exercise or fasting
- Frequent trips to the bathroom after meals

- Overachieving and impulsive behaviors
- Peculiar eating habits or rituals
- Physical symptoms such as discolored teeth, stomach pain, weakness or fatigue

Binge-Eating Disorder is characterized by uncontrollable excessive eating, followed by feelings of shame and guilt. Unlike those with Bulimia, teenagers with Binge-Eating Disorder typically do not purge or restrict food. According to the National Eating Disorder Association, Binge-Eating Disorder is the most common eating disorder in the United States. Signs of Binge-Eating Disorder may include:

- Eating an unusually large amount of food in a distinct period of time
- Hiding food or discarded food containers/wrappers
- Eating in secret because of feeling embarrassed by how much they are eating
- Eating when stressed or when feeling uncertain how to cope
- Experimentation with different diets
- Physical symptoms associated with Binge-Eating Disorder are long-term and can include weight gain, high blood pressure, skin disorders, and heart disease.

Getting a diagnosis is the first step toward recovery from an eating disorder. Treatment generally involves a multidisciplinary approach that includes a combination of psychological and nutritional counseling, along with medical monitoring. Seeking guidance from a family physician is a great first-step resource for information on how to connect to treatment and support.

While there is no sure way to prevent eating disorders, parents and guardians can play a crucial role in helping youth maintain a healthy relationship with food. Open communication with youth is essential in promoting a healthy body image. Below are a few strategies to help children and teens develop healthy-eating behaviors:

- Model a positive relationship with food. Kids watch adults and the way they interact with food. Eat meals together when possible and show that food is fuel for nutrition and overall health. Discuss foods in terms of how healthy they are, not how “good” or “bad” they are.
- Avoid making comments about the appearance of others’ bodies.
- Cultivate and reinforce a healthy body image. Talk to kids about self-image and offer reassurance that body shapes can vary. Avoid criticizing your own body in front of your child.
- Promote physical activity. Talk positively about exercise as a celebration of what the body can do as opposed to a way to change or alter appearance.
- Talk to kids about the effects of puberty. Help them to understand that weight gain is a healthy and normal part of development.
- Communicate about the media’s narrow depiction of bodies. Social media, movies, TV shows, magazines and advertisements often send the message that only a certain body type is acceptable. These messages can harm body image.

References: Child Mind Institute; Harvard Medical Center; Mayo Clinic; National Eating Disorder Association