

Maryland School Mental Health Alliance*

Eating Disorders in Children and Adolescents Information for School Clinicians

Definition

An *Eating Disorder* is a psychological condition that manifests itself in unhealthy eating habits. There are four diagnoses, which are characterized by specific behaviors exhibited by the individual. Two primary behaviors are:

Binging: is the consumption of a large amount of food in a short period of time.

Purging: often refers to self-induced vomiting; misuse of laxative, diet pills, or water pills are also considered purging

Bulimia Nervosa: is the most common of the four diagnoses. It is characterized by a preoccupation with food and weight, bingeing and a compensation for bingeing by purging, excessive exercise or fasting. This pattern is accompanied by shame and secrecy.

Anorexia Nervosa: is characterized by a refusal to maintain a normal weight for one's height, body type, age, and activity level; intense fear of becoming "fat" or gaining weight (extreme concern over one's weight); body image misperception; and loss of menstrual periods in females.

Binge Eating Disorder: is characterized by bingeing, feelings of shame and self-hatred associated with bingeing, but no compensatory behavior such as purging.

Eating Disorders Not Otherwise Specified: covers all maladaptive eating behaviors that do not fit into the above diagnoses, examples include; restricting food intake, meeting some but not all of the requirements for the above diagnoses, chewing food and spitting it out, or bingeing and purging irregularly.

Why do we care?

Students with an eating disorder may:

- Be perfectionists who have poor body image and an overall low self-esteem.
- Be prone to mood swings, perfectionism, and depression.
- Jeopardize their overall health including both physical and psychological health with their unhealthy eating habits.
- Achieve less than desired performance in their academic school work.
- Suffer from other psychiatric disorders such as depression, anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder, and alcohol and drug dependencies.
- Struggle in their relationships with their family and friends.

What can we do about it?

- **To assist with your diagnosis of an eating disorder, always look for other mental disorders.** Eating disorders are mostly associated with other mental disturbances such as depression, mood disorders, and anxiety disorders.

- **Schedule eating disorder information sessions for parents and caregivers.** Discuss the symptoms and diagnoses of eating disorders and place emphasis on preventive measures.
- **Correlate your efforts with teachers and school officials to add healthy life style courses into the school's educational programs.** Since treating eating disorders can both be lengthy and expensive, it is beneficial to use preventive measures before the problem arises.
- **A treatment plan should consist of cognitive-behavioral, interpersonal, and family therapy.** A complete course of treatment should consider all of the contributing factors such as the person's own personality, environment, relationships, and family.
- **Research the best location and the most effective option for treatment in your area.** Always be prepared to make a referral to parents and caregivers of the affected children with eating disorders.

Key Resources & Links

American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry: Facts for families with teenagers with eating disorders.

<http://www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/eating.htm>

Academy for Eating Disorders: About eating disorders/diagnoses and more specifically, eating disorder diagnoses

<http://www.aedweb.org/>

http://www.aedweb.org/eating_disorders/diagnoses.cfm

American Psychiatric Association: Let's Talk Facts about Eating Disorders

<http://www.healthyminds.org/multimedia/eatingdisorders.pdf>

Dying to be Thin investigates the causes, complexities, and treatments for the eating disorders anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. PBS also provides a teacher's guide to the film and activities to do in the classroom. This film is accessible at:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/thin/>

Eating Disorders Facts About Eating Disorders and the Search for Solutions

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/eatingdisorders.cfm>

National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders

<http://www.anad.org/>

When Food Becomes a Problem is a structured lesson plan that educates students about the dangers of eating disorders; it takes approximately 2 or 3 class periods to complete. All materials are accessible at:

http://pbskids.org/itsmylife/parents/lesson_plans/when_food_is_a_problem.html

**Developed by the Center for School Mental Health (<http://csmh.umaryland.edu>) in collaboration with the Maryland School Mental Health Alliance.*