

Stopping the Cycle

There can be few things more frightening to a parent than seeing their child develop a destructive disorder. We experience a wide range of emotions, from shock, confusion, and even anger, to compassion and protectiveness. Helping your child in coping with a disorder you don't understand is very difficult, but there really is no choice — your child needs an incredible amount of support as well as daily (maybe even hourly) help to overcome his or her challenge. It is up to you to respond by creating a safe, healthy environment and a culture of open communication that will replace incorrect thinking patterns.

What is an Eating Disorder?

Eating disorders were far less understood in earlier generations. Recent years have seen a surge in research, as doctors realize just how many young people suffer because of them. An eating disorder is a set of thought patterns that causes the victim to have a skewed image of themselves. This false image prompts unhealthy behaviors like self-starvation, purging actions, and binge eating.



LEARN MORE

Make smart decisions about your health and visit a physician or health specialist for advice and questions.

National Eating Disorders Association

www.nationaleatingdisorders.org

National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders, Inc.

www.anad.org

COPING WITH A CHILD'S EATING DISORDER



How Eating Disorders Develop

Part of the mystery of eating disorders is that they can arise from a wide range of influences and factors. Generally, young people who have an unusual amount of stress in their lives are at risk of developing a disorder. Depression and abuse make kids vulnerable to thinking that they are ugly, fat, or worthless. The universal emphasis on idealized body types among celebrities, athletes, and other common role models perpetuates these negative thoughts. The more these body types are highlighted in young people's minds, the more dissatisfied with themselves they can become. In time, this dissatisfaction becomes an unhealthy obsession.

You can help prevent the development of eating disorders by maintaining a safe, healthy, trusting environment at home. Keep in touch with your child, and make sure that you know about their stresses. When a child has no one to talk to about poor body image, confusing cultural influences, or pressures at school, conditions are ripe for developing a disorder.



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Warning Signs

Parents are often shocked to discover that their child has had an eating disorder for some time without their knowledge. This does not necessarily reflect carelessness on the parents' part; many kids with disorders become very good at hiding their troubles even from those closest to them. The cycle of extreme behavior and shame drives victims to conceal their actions, but there are signs that parents can watch out for.

Discomfort about Food

As food and weight loss become an obsession, a young person will become very uncomfortable with eating around other people or even talking about food. Eating alone and appearing to hardly ever eat at all are two major warning signs. Unusual "rituals" with food, such as cutting it up obsessively, or eating very large amounts of food without gaining observable weight, are other possible signs.

Evidence of Purging

Purging usually takes place in the form of forced vomiting, although laxative abuse is another common form. Kids and teens who vomit after nearly every meal will eventually exhibit damaged teeth, sores in the mouth, and pain in the esophagus from exposure to stomach acid.

Parents should also be alert to discarded laxative packaging and unusual visits to the restroom, particularly following meals.

Poor Body Image

It is healthy for young people to take charge of their own fitness, but obsession with body image is not. Parents should take it seriously when their child spends a large amount of time thinking and talking about how they look, agonizing over what to wear, and avoiding social activities because of self-consciousness.

Dangers

Although it may be tempting to do so, don't dismiss these warning signs as a "passing phase" or normal elements of adolescence. Eating disorders do both temporary and permanent damage, and addressing them early is the best way to minimize their effects.

Starvation, purging, and binge eating behaviors put a great deal of strain on the body. Fluid balance, blood pressure, and vital organs all suffer during these extreme conditions, and young people who become underweight are in danger of permanently injuring the heart, brain, and digestive organs.

Mentally, eating disorders extend the depression, low self-esteem, and lack of confidence that cause them. In the most tragic cases, the shame becomes so strong that young people attempt to take their own lives rather than continue facing their disorder.



Your Reactions

The way you react to news that your child has an eating disorder is very important. Expressions of anger and disappointment will only create more of the negative emotions that contributed to the disorder in the first place, and will make your child feel as if they have nowhere to turn for help. As scared and upset as you may be, remember that your child needs stability and assurance of your love more than anything else.

Understanding and Patience

A child with an eating disorder needs to know that his parent understands his struggle and is ready to help him confront it head-on. Both you and your child will need exceptional amounts of patience, working through past, present, and future failures to gradually beat their disorder.

Communication and Support

Don't make assumptions about your child's mental state. Find out by asking questions, and establish a pattern of open, vulnerable, trusting communication. The incorrect thinking patterns caused by a disorder need to be opposed by rational, truthful advice from a trusted authority. The more you talk honestly with your child in a loving way, the more he will learn to trust and believe you.

Therapy

The good news for children with eating disorders (and their parents) is that therapy has proven to be a very effective cure for most victims. With commitment, patience, and time, a child or teenager can slowly reverse his behavior and thinking. As a parent, you are in a unique position to provide emotional support and accountability during this process.

Providing an environment of support and open communication will help your child on the road to recovery. Make a conscious effort to tell your child what makes him or her special to help build self-confidence on a daily basis. Dealing with your child's eating disorder is a tough task, but you are not alone. Seek out professional help and positive experiences to support your child's recovery and soon you will see a positive result.

Do not dismiss the warning signs as a "phase." Ask questions and seek help when necessary. Therapy has proven to be effective for most patients.

