



Understanding disordered eating

When eating, exercise and weight or shape become a preoccupation – or distressing – for a child or young person, they may be experiencing disordered eating.

What is disordered eating?

Disordered eating may include food restriction, bingeing and purging, excessive exercise, laxative use, preoccupation with body weight or extreme fussiness with food.

It can affect people of all ages, genders, ethnicity, sizes, shapes, abilities and socioeconomic backgrounds.

When disordered eating behaviours significantly impact a child or young person's functioning across multiple areas of their life (physical, emotional, cognitive, social, educational), they may be experiencing an eating disorder.

As an educator, it's not your role to diagnose or treat a child or young person you may be concerned about.

Understanding disordered eating and the associated warning signs, as well as understanding how to seek support if concerned, is a great start to help you better support children and young people.

Early identification and intervention have been shown to be critical in achieving the best outcomes for disordered eating, particularly for young people.

What are the warning signs?

Each child or young person may display different warning signs, which may be behavioural, physical or emotional.

Possible warning signs include:

- noticeable change in attitude/performance in the classroom
- difficulty concentrating in class
- frequently expressing body image complaints/concerns
- being extremely sensitive to comments about weight, shape, eating and exercise
- talking about or engaging in dieting and a preoccupation with food
- eating alone or avoiding eating food with others in school hours

- changes in exercise or training behaviours (mainly increases in volume or duration, exercising through injury or illness)
- appearing sad, depressed or anxious
- experiencing other mental health issues
- experiencing physical symptoms such as fainting or dizziness, tiredness, feeling cold even in warm weather
- being the target of weight-based or other bullying (online and face-to-face)
- changes in weight
- appearing withdrawn and reluctant to ask for help (or avoiding drawing attention to self).

It's important to be mindful that a person's size, shape or weight alone is not an indicator of whether or not someone is engaging in disordered eating behaviours.

What can I do if I'm concerned about a child or young person?

It's important to explore your concerns, as evidence shows early intervention can help achieve the best outcomes for children and young people.

A good place to start might be contacting your learning community's wellbeing team or guidance counsellor. Or you can contact the Butterfly National Helpline 1800 33 4673.

Remember, it's not your responsibility to diagnose or treat a student experiencing disordered eating - only to support them.

Find out more in the Be You Fact Sheet [supporting children and young people experiencing disordered eating](#).

Be You Professional Learning

Learn more about how to recognise behaviours that might indicate early signs of mental health issues, how to talk to children and young people about these issues, and how to provide appropriate and timely support in the [Early Support](#) domain.

References

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External links

Butterfly – [National Helpline](#)

National Eating Disorders Collaboration – [Disordered Eating and Dieting](#)