

# Eating Disorders

## Early Signs of Eating Disorders

Recognising early signs of eating disorders in children and young people is crucial. Common signs include:

- **Obsession with body weight and shape:** Frequent self-weighing, body comparisons, and dissatisfaction with appearance.
- **Preoccupation with food:** Strict food rules, sudden diet changes, increased interest in food without eating it.
- **Changes in eating habits:** Eating significantly more or less, skipping meals, eating in secret, or making excuses to avoid food.
- **Emotional changes:** Increased moodiness, irritability, anxiety, withdrawal from social activities.
- **Physical symptoms:** Fatigue, dizziness, constipation, and stomach aches.

## Identifying Risk Factors

Eating disorders can affect anyone, but certain factors increase risk:

- **Genetics:** A family history of eating disorders raises susceptibility.
- **Environmental pressures:** Media can promote thinness which can lead to unhealthy weight control behaviours.
- **Psychological factors:** Low self-esteem, perfectionism, and anxiety are common traits in those affected.
- **Life transitions and stressors:** Puberty, friendships/family issues, trauma, or loss may contribute to development.

## How to Talk About Eating Disorders

Addressing concerns requires sensitivity:

- Choose a **private and comfortable** setting.
- Be **supportive and non-judgmental**, allowing the person to express their feelings.
- Express **specific concerns** about their wellbeing or health impacts.
- Offer **support and guidance**, reassuring them that help is available.
- Avoid **blame and criticism**—eating disorders are mental health conditions, not choices.
- Follow up regularly and, if necessary, seek professional help.

## The Role of Social Media

Social media contributes to body dissatisfaction by promoting:

- Diet culture, constant bombardment of calorie counting, fad diets or labelling foods as “good” or “bad.”
- Unrealistic beauty standards through edited images and ever increasing influencer content.
- Algorithms reinforcing unhealthy behaviours.
- Pro-eating disorder groups normalising disordered eating.

## Parental Strategies for Safer Social Media Use

- Monitor and guide online activity.
- Encourage unfollowing triggering accounts.
- Set screen time limits.
- Have open communication about media influences.
- Use parental controls where available.
- **Educate yourself** about the condition.
- **Seek professional help** and ask for family involvement in treatment.
- **Be patient**—recovery takes time.
- **Avoid judgment and criticism**, focusing instead on strengths.
- **Encourage open communication** and provide a positive, supportive home environment.

## Tips for Teachers and Safe Workers

- Create a **safe and supportive** classroom / school environment.
- Be flexible and understanding when they need to attend appointments etc.
- Address **family dynamics** and co-occurring mental health conditions.
- Promote **positive body image and curb your own discussions around dieting**.

## Supporting Friends with Eating Disorders

- **Educate yourself** rather than expecting your friend to explain their illness.
- Offer **encouragement and support** without judgment.
- Avoid discussions about **food, weight, or appearance**.
- Be a **trustworthy, supportive person** in their life.

Eating disorders are serious but treatable conditions. With awareness, early intervention, and support, recovery is possible.