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National Alliance on Mental Illness

Mercer

Serving the New Jersey Capital Area



A PARENT'S GUIDE TO EATING DISORDERS

Understanding eating disorders,
helping children develop healthy
relationships with food & what to
do if your child shows signs of an
eating disorder

TABLE OF CONTENTS

03 Introduction

04 What are eating disorders?

05 Different types of eating disorders

08 Eating disorders in teenagers

09 Healthy relationships with food

10 How to help

11 Resources

Introduction

Most parents want their children to be as happy and healthy as possible. However, many parents are not aware of the problems their children may be facing. Unfortunately, eating disorders are on the rise in teenagers. With eating disorders being the deadliest mental illness, it is crucial for parents to be aware of signs and symptoms of them. When a parent intervenes and gets help for their child early on, they can prevent the serious health problems that come with eating disorders.

I encourage you to look through this tool kit to learn about various eating disorders, how to lessen the chance of them occurring in the first place and how to help your child if you notice signs of an eating disorder.

I have seen how having an eating disorder can greatly decrease quality of life and lead to physical illness. It is important to let someone suffering know that they are not alone in the battle they are facing.

-Danielle, Author & NAMI Mercer Intern

What are Eating Disorders?

Eating disorders affect a person's eating behaviors as well as their attitudes and feelings about food and their body.

Eating disorders affect a person's mental health and can cause life threatening problems with physical health.

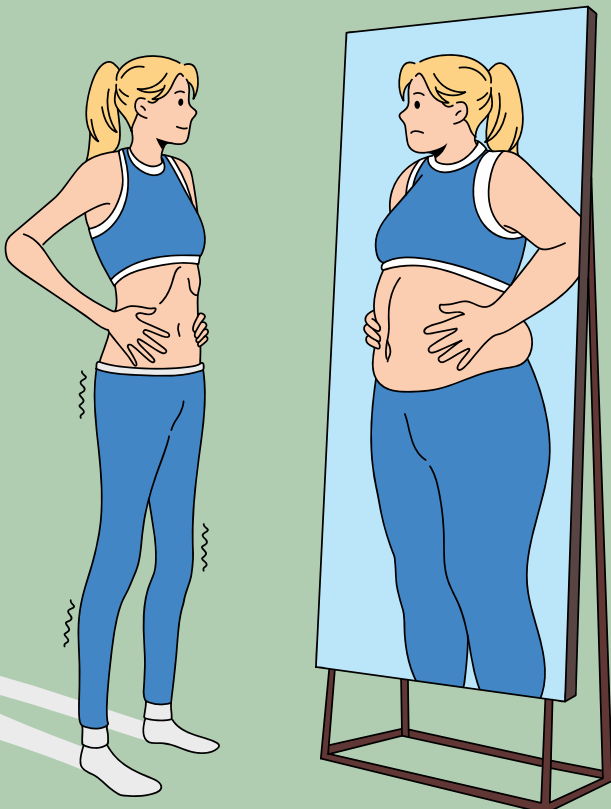
Anorexia, which is the most well-known eating disorder, is the deadliest mental illness. 10% of people with anorexia die within 10 years of diagnosis and up to 20% will die after 20 years. 1 in 5 of these deaths are due to suicide.



Types of Eating Disorders- Anorexia

- Purposely eating very little.
- Having a low body weight, but also a distorted body image. (They see themselves as fat even though they are very thin).
- Having an intense fear of weight gain or looking fat.
- Thinking about food and calories all the time and being strict about what they eat.
- Fasting, exercising too much or using laxatives.
- Frequently weighing themselves.

How does anorexia affect those who suffer from it?



- Anorexia leads to serious health problems from undernutrition and low body weight such as low blood pressure, slow irregular heartbeat, feeling dizzy or tired, delayed puberty, hair loss and decreased cognitive function.
- Those suffering from anorexia may: have mood changes, feelings of sadness, loneliness, anxiety related to gaining weight, need for approval and may wear baggy clothes.

Types of Eating Disorders- Bulimia

- Appearing thin, average or overweight.
- Eating much more than most people would in a set period of time (binging) and feeling unable to stop.
- Doing things to make up for overeating (called purging).
- Using laxatives, diuretics, weight loss pills, fasting, or exercising to compensate for binges.
- Engaging in regular binging/purging cycles
- based on body shape and size.
- Tending to hide binges from others



How does bulimia affect people who suffer with it?

- Health problems caused by vomiting, laxatives or diuretics such as low blood pressure, tooth erosion, swollen cheeks, feeling dizzy tired or weak.
- Low self-esteem, anxiety and depression.
- Bulimia commonly co-exists with alcohol and drug problems.



Types of Eating Disorders

Binge Eating Disorder



- Overeat (whether hungry or not) and feel out of control to stop and unlike bulimia, do not "make up for it" with exercise, laxatives etc.
- May feel guilty after eating.
- Often become very overweight.
- May eat alone so people don't see the quantity of food they are consuming.
- Once a week binges for 3 months may be a sign of binge eating disorder.

How does binge eating disorder affect those who struggle with it?

- Health problems associated with weight (diabetes, high bp, high cholesterol, sleep apnea).
- Low self esteem.
- Feeling angry or helpless.
- Trouble coping with strong emotions.

Avoidant Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID)



- Not interested in food or avoiding foods.
- Turned off by the smell, taste, texture or color of food or may be afraid of choke or vomiting
- No other medical problem that would explain their behaviors

How does ARFID affect those who struggle with it?

- Not getting enough vitamins, minerals and protein.
- Not growing properly.
- More likely to have anxiety, OCD, autism or ADHD.

Eating Disorders in Teenagers

- 1/10 young women struggle with an eating disorder and this number is increasing.
- Eating disorders also occur in young men, but less frequently.
- Teenagers are most at risk and have the worst effects as adolescence is a time of rapid growth and maturation.
- The exact cause of the development of eating disorders is not certain but there is a combination of factors that play a role- family history, anxiety, life changes, trauma, dieting and body dissatisfaction.
- Anorexia tends to be about control- a teenager with anorexia is typically a female, perfectionist and high achiever in school but also has low self esteem. The teenager wants to gain a sense of control over their life and gets satisfaction by saying "no" to foods.



Helping Your Kids Develop Healthy Relationships With Food

While there is no way to completely prevent eating disorders, certain things can help kids develop healthy relationships with food and make eating disorders less likely to develop.

- Avoid labeling food as good or bad. When we label food as "junk" or "unhealthy", this can lead to overindulgence when given the opportunity. Instead label food as "always" or "sometimes" foods (with veggies, fruits for example being always and ice cream being sometimes).
- Avoid using food as reward or punishment- assigning emotional stakes or consequences can lead to unhealthy eating habits and feelings towards food.
- Don't force children to finish their plate- let them listen to their internal signs of fullness.
- Model healthy behavior- eat regular meals and snacks, listen to needs related to own hunger, avoid negative comments regarding food or own body image such as "I can't believe I gained 10 pounds, I look terrible" as kids may begin to internalize these.
- Be weight neutral- your child's size will change over time, avoid commenting on child's body, be neutral and point out that bodies naturally come in different shapes and sizes.
- Encourage kids to eat a variety of foods and encourage them to do physical activities that bring them joy.



How to Help your Child if you Notice Signs of an Eating Disorder

- Research the condition thoroughly to be prepared to understand and empathize with your child.
- Recognize the eating disorder is not their fault and can occur for many reasons.
- Investigate any underlying issues that may be leading triggers (bullying, self esteem etc.)
- Encourage your child to accept treatment- a common line of thinking is that they are not sick enough to get better, however early treatment is important as eating disorders can lead to serious health problems.



Resources

NAMI Mercer Helpline

Call (609) 799-8994 x17

Email: helpline@namimercer.org

NAMI Helpline (M-F; 10 AM-10 PM)

Call 1-800-950-NAMI (6264)

Email at helpline@nami.org

24/7 NAMI Crisis Text Line

Text 741741

24/7 New Jersey Suicide Prevention Hopeline

Call (855) 654-6735

24/7 Suicide and Crisis Hotline

Call or text 988

**YOU ARE
NOT ALONE**

Thank you!



Visit namimercer.org for more mental
health resources