

Solutions Newsletter

February 2023



Effective School
Solutions

Solutions is a newsletter published by ESS for parents, guardians, and caretakers. Each issue highlights an important topic related to children's mental health and provides practical applications for parents in the home environment.

Understanding the Risks and Signs of Eating Disorders

The National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) and other US-based advocacy and treatment organizations have designated February 27 to March 5 as this year's national Eating Disorders Awareness Week. During this annual public awareness campaign eating disorder professionals and advocates support educational outreach programs aimed at both preventing eating disorders and helping those already suffering with the physical and emotional consequences of this cluster of diagnoses.

When we see people who look painfully thin, we might wonder if they have cancer or some other medical condition, and perhaps overlook the possibility that disordered eating might be to blame. Even harder to detect are the eating disorder struggles of those who appear to be of average weight, or even in those who are overweight since our society often judges overweight people as weak and/or lacking self-control rather than as suffering from a medical or mental health disorder. It is important to understand, though, that eating disorders carry many medical and mental health risks and have the highest death rate of any mental health diagnosis.

There are many types of disordered eating patterns and unhealthy relationships with food, but the most common eating disorders that are formally recognized by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) include:

- **Anorexia Nervosa**, characterized by the extreme restriction of food intake, lower than expected body weight, highly distorted body image, and the fear of gaining weight. Anorexia nervosa can also be found in individuals who fall within expected weight ranges, and while it is the eating disorder that is perhaps the best known, it is actually the least common.
- **Bulimia Nervosa** is characterized by recurrent episodes of binge eating followed by behaviors meant to compensate for the calories consumed, including purging (vomiting), fasting, excessive exercise, and laxative use to avoid gaining weight.
- **Binge Eating Disorder** is characterized by repeated episodes of consuming a large amount of food accompanied by a feeling of loss of control. It is most often found among people of larger body sizes.
- **Other Specified Feeding and Eating Disorder** is a catch-all category that is used when an individual shows disordered eating behaviors that do not meet the specific criteria for one of the above disorders. People with these eating patterns will often go on to develop full blown eating disorders.

- **Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder** involves restricted food intake that makes it difficult for individuals to meet nutritional and/or energy needs, but does not include body image problems.

From the moment a baby is born parents fret about whether their child is eating enough to grow and develop normally. Parents of picky eaters worry and try everything to coax their child to eat. Feeding is one of the first and most essential parts of parenting and it can be difficult to know whether a child's eating patterns are problematic. Parents should consult a pediatrician and a mental health professional if they notice that their child:

- Is showing significant weight loss or gain.
- Always wears clothing that hides the shape of the body.
- Frequently comes home with uneaten lunches or snacks, feels uncomfortable or refuses to eat in front of others, or shows extreme pickiness about food choices.
- Consistently spends a lot of time in the bathroom, especially after eating.
- Frequently expresses dissatisfaction with their body or how they look.
- Is extremely perfectionistic.
- Frequently expresses feelings of being out of control of their own lives.

If you suspect that your child has an eating disorder, avoid talking excessively about food, eating, weight, or physical appearance and seek a professional consultation as soon as possible. Avoid body-shaming comments and judgmental language directed at your child, yourself, or others.

For help coping with an eating disorder contact the NEDA Helpline at [Eating Disorders Helpline | Chat, Call, or Text | NEDA \(nationaleatingdisorders.org\)](#) or call 1-800-931-2237.

Resources:

[Eating Disorders: Definition, Symptoms, Traits, Causes, Treatment \(verywellmind.com\)](#)

[What Is Weight Stigma? \(verywellmind.com\)](#)

[Parents & Caregivers | National Eating Disorders Association](#)