



# Children's Mental Health Matters!

## Facts for Educators

### Eating Disorders in Children and Adolescents

#### Definition

An *Eating Disorder* is a psychological condition that manifests itself in unhealthy eating habits. There are four diagnoses which are characterized by specific behaviors exhibited by the individual. Two primary behaviors are *Binging*, the consumption of a large amount of food in a short period of time, and *Purging* or self-induced vomiting. Misuse of laxative, diet pills, or water pills are also considered purging.

*Bulimia Nervosa* is the most common of the four diagnoses. It is characterized by a preoccupation with food and weight, binging and a compensation for binging by purging, excessive exercise or fasting. This pattern is accompanied by shame and secrecy.

*Anorexia Nervosa* is characterized by a refusal to maintain a normal weight for one's height, body type, age, and activity level; intense fear of becoming "fat" or gaining weight (extreme concern over one's weight); body image misperception; and loss of menstrual periods in females.

*Binge Eating Disorder* is characterized by binging, feelings of shame and self-hatred associated with binging, but no compensatory behavior such as purging.

*Eating Disorders Not Otherwise Specified*: covers all maladaptive eating behaviors that do not fit into the above diagnoses. Examples include: restricting food intake, meeting some but not all of the requirements for the above diagnoses, chewing food and spitting it out, or binging and purging irregularly.

#### Why do we care?

- Of the currently more than 10 million Americans afflicted with eating disorders, 90 percent are children and adolescents.
- The average age of eating disorders onset has dropped from 13-17 to 9-12.

- The number of males with eating disorders has doubled during the past decade.

#### Students with an eating disorder may:

- Exhibit low-self esteem and a poor body image.
- Be prone to mood swings, perfectionism and depression.
- Suffer from many physical problems such as:
  - Excessive weight loss
  - Irregularity or absence of menstruation in females
  - Hair loss
  - Severe digestive system problems
  - Damaged vital organs
  - Tooth and gum problems
  - Swollen salivary glands due to induced vomiting
  - General malnutrition
  - Dehydration
  - Thinning of the bones resulting in osteoporosis or osteopenia
- Struggle in their relationships with their family and friends.
- Perform poorly in their academic performance.
- Jeopardize their overall health, including both physical and psychological health, with their unhealthy eating habits.
- Achieve less than desired performance in their academic school work.
- Suffer from other psychiatric disorders such as depression, anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder, and alcohol and drug dependencies.

#### What can we do about it?

- Discuss your concerns with the child's parents.** Make sure to consult with the family.
- To assist with diagnosis of an eating disorder, always look for other psychiatric disorders.** Eating disorders are mostly associated with other mental disturbances such as depression, mood disorders, and anxiety disorders.

# Facts for Educators

## *Eating Disorders in Children and Adolescents Continued*

- ✎ **Schedule eating disorder information sessions for parents and caregivers.** Discuss the symptoms and diagnoses of eating disorders and place emphasis on preventive measures.
- ✎ **Correlate your efforts with teachers and school officials to add healthy lifestyle courses into the school's educational programs.** Since treating eating disorders can be both lengthy and expensive, it is beneficial to use preventive measures before the problem arises.
- ✎ **A treatment plan should consist of cognitive-behavioral, interpersonal and family therapy.** A complete course of treatment should consider all of the contributing factors such as the person's own personality, environment, relationships and family.
- ✎ **Research the best location and the most effective option for treatment in your area.** Always be prepared to make a referral to parents and caregivers of the affected children with eating disorders.

Eating Disorders Facts About Eating Disorders and the Search for Solutions - <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/eatingdisorders.cfm>

National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders - <http://www.anad.org/>

National Eating Disorders Association  
Ten Things Parents Can Do to Prevent Eating Disorders  
[http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/p.asp?WebPage\\_ID=286&Profile\\_ID=41171](http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/p.asp?WebPage_ID=286&Profile_ID=41171)

*When Food Becomes a Problem* is a structured lesson plan that educates students about the dangers of eating disorders; it takes approximately 2 or 3 class periods to complete. All materials are accessible at: [http://pbskids.org/itsmylife/parents/lesson\\_plans/when\\_food\\_is\\_a\\_problem.html](http://pbskids.org/itsmylife/parents/lesson_plans/when_food_is_a_problem.html)

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### Resources/Links

American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry  
Facts for families with teenagers with eating disorders.  
<http://www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/eating.htm>

Academy for Eating Disorders  
About eating disorders/diagnoses and more specifically, eating disorder diagnoses  
<http://www.aedweb.org/>  
[http://www.aedweb.org/eating\\_disorders/diagnoses.cfm](http://www.aedweb.org/eating_disorders/diagnoses.cfm)

American Psychiatric Association  
Let's Talk Facts about Eating Disorders  
<http://www.healthyminds.org/multimedia/eatingdisorders.pdf>  
Common Questions about Eating Disorders  
<http://healthyminds.org/expertopinion9.cfm>

*Dying to be Thin* investigates the causes, complexities, and treatments for the eating disorders anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. PBS also provides a teacher's guide to the film and activities to do in the classroom. This film is accessible at:  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/thin/>

Adapted from Resources found on:  
[www.schoolmentalhealth.org](http://www.schoolmentalhealth.org) March 2009