
UNDERSTANDING FOOD AND WEIGHT PREOCCUPATION IN YOUTH

A GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS

nedic

National Eating Disorder Information Centre

www.nedic.ca

DISORDERED EATING

Disordered eating is a term describing eating behaviours that are problematic but do not meet the criteria for a diagnosable eating disorder. These unhealthy behaviours include fasting or food restriction, yo-yo dieting, compulsive overeating, and steroid use. Weight and shape preoccupation and a drive for perfection are common among individuals with disordered eating. For some individuals, disordered eating may arise periodically. It can also be triggered by a particular life stressor (e.g., transferring to a new school, a relationship conflict), illness, or preparing for an athletic event.

EATING DISORDERS

When disordered eating starts to get in the way of a student's everyday life and activities or is used to cope with strong feelings, educators should become vigilant. Disordered eating that goes unaddressed can develop into an eating disorder.

An eating disorder may serve specific functions in an individual's life, such as regulating or numbing emotions, suppressing traumatic memories, providing a sense of achievement, or masking feelings of inadequacy or self-hate.

Eating disorders are extreme expressions of a range of body shape/weight- and food-related issues. They include anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge-eating disorder. Others involve signs and symptoms that are not consistent with the all of the diagnostic criteria for one of these three eating disorders (e.g., someone who induces vomiting but does not binge eat and is not underweight), yet still interfere significantly with normal functioning. All eating disorders are serious mental illnesses and can be life-threatening.

DISCLAIMER: Only a qualified health professional can diagnose an eating disorder. This information is meant only to act as a guide to offer support to students and is not, under any circumstances, a guide for official diagnosis. If you are concerned about the wellbeing of your students, please contact your school's administration, social worker, or psychologist.

Warning signs:

- Excessive concern about one's weight, size, or shape.
- Preoccupation with food and nutrition.
- Extreme concern about being judged by others on appearance and behaviour.
- Depression or irritability.
- Guilt or shame about eating.
- Rigid and ritualistic eating behaviours.
- Progressive elimination of foods from one's diet.
- Feeling fat despite being at a low or "average" weight.
- Exercising through fatigue, illness, or injury.
- Noticeable weight loss or weight fluctuations.
- Vomiting or laxative abuse.

BODY-BASED BULLYING

Body-based bullying among youth is prevalent in the school setting. It is a leading cause of body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem, which in turn can contribute to the development of an eating disorder.

Some facts:

- Research shows that 40% of 11- and 12-year-olds are teased about their appearance, making body-based bullying the most common form of bullying in schools.
- Over half of bullied students do not report being bullied to a teacher.
- Poor body-image, as a result of being bullied, leads individuals to not voicing their opinions and avoiding academic, social, and economic opportunities.
- Teachers can play an instrumental role in preventing bullying from occurring in schools.

What can educators do?

Educators should have a zero-tolerance policy for body-based bullying. It is important that students feel safe and accepted in their learning environment.

Educators should be approachable and supportive so that students feel comfortable reporting bullying incidents to them.

NEDIC's outreach and education team is available to deliver workshops for educators on preventing and addressing body-based bullying. For more information, visit nedic.ca/presentation-outreach

HOW YOU CAN HELP

If a student you know is exhibiting signs and symptoms of an eating disorder:

People can, and do, recover from eating disorders, but professional help is almost always required. The more quickly an eating disorder is identified and treated, the better chance the individual has of recovery. If you observe signs and symptoms of an eating disorder in a student, it's important to seek help immediately. Family members and friends can also benefit from information and support.

- Look at the resources available at or within your school.
- Reach out to the social worker and/or psychologist within your school/board for information and help – the more you know, the better you can support the student.
- Tell the student's parent/caregiver of your concerns – seek guidance from the school social worker/psychologist for this.
- Encourage the student and their parent/caregiver to seek professional help – refer them to NEDIC which maintains a national directory of service providers who specialize in food and weight preoccupation.
- Be patient and compassionate – overcoming food and weight preoccupation is not easy.

RESOURCES

Beyond Images / Au-delà de l'image curriculum

Beyond Images (www.beyondimages.ca) / Au-delà de l'image (www.audeladelimage.ca) is a self-esteem and body image curriculum for grades 4–8, which is available free to educators across Canada. It meets provincial curriculum standards and exposes students to important messages about body image, self-esteem and media literacy.

Teach Body Image portal for teachers and parents:

www.teachbodyimage.com

Education & outreach

NEDIC provides presentations to both students and educators designed to create awareness about and prevent issues across the spectrum of food and weight preoccupation. These workshops promote critical thinking skills while educating about and encouraging healthy, balanced lifestyle practices.

Website, helpline & instant chat service

For further information refer to NEDIC's website www.nedic.ca, helpline, or instant chat service.

Toll-free 1-866-633-4220

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Charitable Registration Number 12386 4068 RR 0001