

National Eating Disorders

Awareness Week

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What is the purpose of Eating Disorders Awareness Week? NED Awareness week runs the last week of February and its goal is to prevent eating disorders and body image issues while reducing the stigma surround eating disorders and improving access to treatment. Eating disorders are serious, life-threatening illnesses—not choices—and it's important to recognize the pressures, attitudes and behaviors that shape the disorder.

What is an eating disorder? An eating disorder is both an emotional and a physical problem in which the individual is obsessed with food, body weight or body shape. They often diet, exercise, and/or eat excessively. These behaviors can have a severe effect on their health and can even be life threatening. There are three common types of eating disorders: Anorexia, Bulimia and Binge Eating.

How many people have an eating disorder? After puberty, approximately 5-10 million girls and women and 1 million boys and men are struggling with eating disorders in the USA. Approximately 40% of 4th graders have been on a "diet" and the number one magic wish for young girls age 11-17 is to be thinner. More than one in three "normal dieters" will progress to pathological dieting. It primarily affects people in their teens and twenties, but children as young as 6 and individuals as old as 76 have been diagnosed. And, certainly, while they may not meet all the criteria for an eating disorder, a great majority of men and women in the United States have disordered ideas and behaviors about food and their bodies. Most adults no longer listen to their body's natural instincts as they did as young children. Many decide what and how much to eat based on the number the scale, how tight their jeans fit, whether they exercised, what others are eating or not eating, or because of feelings of sadness, boredom, or anxiety instead of paying attention to their body's natural signs of hunger and fullness.

What causes an eating disorder? A variety of factors, including physical, emotional, social and familial issues, can lead to an increased risk of developing an eating disorder. Having a close relative with an eating disorder, having parents who are overly critical &/or controlling, struggling with the physical and emotional changes involved with becoming a teen & trying to meet society's ideals of beauty, may all lead to developing an eating disorder. They are also common in people who experience depression, anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorders.

What are the signs of an eating disorder? Individuals with **Anorexia** have an intense fear of gaining weight, eat very little, avoid meal times, pick at their food, track every calorie they eat and/or exercise excessively. People with **Bulimia** also have an intense fear of gaining weight but they eat excessively and immediately purge by vomiting, taking diet pills, laxatives or water pills. They may also exercise excessively. Those with **Binge Eating** disorders have frequent episodes of eating to excess but they do not purge. They tend to eat whether or not they are hungry, usually alone and often very quickly.

What can be done to help people with an eating disorder? Although eating disorders are potentially lethal, they are treatable. Parents can help by providing their children with an environment where they can develop healthy eating habits. They can also educate their children how to identify hunger and fullness signals and to help them develop a positive body image, self-esteem, and appreciation for different body types.

They can teach their children to eat a variety of foods, eat when they are truly hungry, and stop when they are no longer hungry. People who eat mindfully and have effective coping strategies for stressors are likely to maintain a healthy weight and avoid eating disorders. Teachers and friends can also help by preparing themselves with accurate information on these disorders and expressing their concern with respect. The most effective and long-lasting treatment for an eating disorder is counseling coupled with careful attention to medical and nutritional needs.

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