

# Eating Disorders



## Symptoms or Behaviors

- Perfectionistic attitude
- Impaired concentration
- Withdrawn
- All or nothing thinking
- Depressed mood or mood swings
- Self-deprecating statements
- Irritability
- Lethargy
- Anxiety
- Fainting spells and dizziness
- Headaches
- Hiding food
- Avoiding snacks or activities that include food
- Frequent trips to the bathroom

## About the Disorder

Nearly all of us worry about our weight at some time in our lives. However, some individuals become so obsessed with their weight and the need to be thin that they develop an eating disorder. The two most common eating disorders are anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa.

Once seen mostly in teens and young adults, these disorders are increasingly seen in younger children as well. Children as young as 4 and 5 years of age are expressing the need to diet, and it's estimated that 40 percent of 9 year-olds have already dieted. Eating disorders are not limited to girls and young women—between 10 and 20 percent of adolescents with eating disorders are boys.

Individuals with anorexia fail to maintain a minimally normal body weight. They engage in abnormal eating behavior and have excessive concerns about food. They are intensely afraid of even the slightest weight gain, and their perception of their body shape and size is significantly distorted. Many individuals with anorexia are compulsive and excessive about exercise. Children and teens with this disorder tend to be perfectionists and overachieving. In teenage girls with anorexia, menstruation may cease, leading to the same kind of bone loss suffered by menopausal women.

Children and teens with bulimia go on eating binges during which they compulsively consume abnormally large amounts of food within a short period of time. To avoid weight gain, they engage in inappropriate compensatory behavior, including fasting, self-induced vomiting, excessive exercise, and the use of laxatives, diuretics, and enemas.

Athletes such as wrestlers, dancers, or gymnasts may fall into disordered eating patterns in an attempt to stay thin or “make their weight.” This can lead to a full-blown eating disorder.

Adolescents who have eating disorders are obsessed with food. Their lives revolve around thoughts and worries about their weight and their eating. Youth who suffer from eating disorders are at risk for alcohol and drug use as well as depression.

If you suspect a student may be suffering from an eating disorder, refer that student immediately for a mental health assessment. Without medical intervention, an individual with an eating disorder faces serious health problems and, in extreme cases, death.

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### Educational Implications

Students with eating disorders may look like model students, often leading the class and being very self-demanding. Others may show poor academic performance. When students with eating disorders are preoccupied with body image and controlling their food intake, they may have short attention spans and poor concentration. These symptoms may also be due to a lack of nutrients from fasting and vomiting. These students often lack the energy and drive necessary to complete assignments or homework.

### Instructional Strategies and Classroom Accommodations

- Stress acceptance in your classroom; successful people come in all sizes and shapes.
- Watch what you say. Comments like "You look terrible," "What have you eaten today?" or "I wish I had that problem" are often hurtful and discouraging.
- Stress progress, not perfection.
- Avoid pushing students to excel beyond their capabilities.
- Avoid high levels of competition.
- Reduce stress where possible by reducing assignments or extending deadlines.

### Resources

#### Eating Disorders Resources/Gürze Books

PO Box 2238  
Carlsbad, CA 92018  
760-434-7553 • 800-756-7533  
www.gurze.net

#### National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders

PO Box 7  
Highland Park, IL 60035  
847-831-3438  
www.anad.org  
*Hotline counseling, referrals, information, and advocacy*

#### National Eating Disorders Association

603 Stewart Street, Suite 803  
Seattle, WA 98101  
206-382-3587  
www.nationaleatingdisorders.org  
*Educational resources on prevention for schools, health professionals, and individuals*

#### Publications

*Body Image, Eating Disorders, and Obesity in Youth*, edited by Kevin Thompson and Linda Smolak, American Psychological Association, 2001.

*Children and Teens Afraid to Eat: Helping Youth in Today's Weight-Obsessed World*, by Frances Berg, Gürze Books, 2001.

*How Did This Happen?: A Practical Guide to Understanding Eating Disorders for Coaches, Parents, and Teachers*, by the Institute for Research and Education HealthSystem Minnesota, 1999.

While it is important to respect a child's need for confidentiality, if you work with children or families, you are legally required to report suspected child abuse or neglect. For more information, consult "Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect: A Resource Guide for Mandated Reporters," available from the Minnesota Department of Human Services.

This fact sheet must not be used for the purpose of making a diagnosis. It is to be used only as a reference for your own understanding and to provide information about the different kinds of behaviors and mental health issues you may encounter in your classroom.