



BEECHEN CLIFF

## Safeguarding Hot Topic: Eating disorders

Eating disorders thrive in isolation and for some young people Covid has provided the perfect storm - Beat (eating disorders charity) has seen an **81%** increase in contact across Helpline channels, including a **162%** rise in social media contact and a **139%** surge in online group attendance since March 2020. Hospital admissions for children with eating disorders has recently risen by a **fifth**.

*'I felt like I was managing but over the last few weeks I have felt that I am slipping back into my eating disorder...I go to bed feeling so disgusted with myself...part of me wants to move away from the illness yet on the other hand part of me feels this is the one thing at the moment with so much uncertainty and change that I can control.'*

A lived experience of a young person suffering from an eating disorder

When someone is suffering from an eating disorder they use food, their weight or shape:

- *To block out or control difficult thoughts;*
- *As a means of coping with, or expressing emotion; and/or*
- *As a coping mechanism to manage day to day, particularly when there is a lack of control over a situation*

[Beat definition]

Eating disorders are serious mental illnesses, which are complex and multifactorial. Eating disorders can be fatal, and cause serious physical and emotional harm. They are treatable and recovery is possible - early intervention increases the chance of recovery .

- 1.25 million people in the UK have an eating disorder (Beat 2017)
- 25% of sufferers are boys/men
- Eating disorders are non-discriminatory - anyone can develop an eating disorder regardless of age, race, gender, ethnicity and social group
- Many eating disorders develop during adolescence
- **Children are 9 times more likely to talk to someone in school about an eating disorder than a parent/carer (Beat)**

Types of eating disorders include - anorexia nervosa, avoidant/restrictive food disorder, binge eating disorder, bulimia nervosa and OSFED (other specified feeding or eating disorder, for example purging disorder or night eating syndrome). Eating disorders may also include misusing laxatives, fasting or excessive exercise. There is often an overlap between different types of eating disorders, and often the eating disorder is a symptom of other deep-rooted issues so is being used as a coping mechanism.



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*'...Anorexia, terrible and life-threatening though it is, it's often not the core problem but it's a symptom of other deep-rooted issues. It's the sufferer's way of trying to handle those other, underlying issues; feelings of worthlessness, depression and negativity.'*

*Dear Michael, Love Dad - Iain Maitland 2016*

### You may notice some of the following warning signs in a young person who is suffering with an eating disorder:

- Marked change in their physical appearance (85% of sufferers do not appear under weight, so this is often difficult to pick up);
- Withdrawn, anxious, low in mood, loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities/subjects, distracted, isolated;
- Avoidance of interacting with peers/teachers;
- Demeanour change - e.g from bubbly and outgoing to quiet and anxious;
- Behaviour around food and eating - refusal to eat, cutting out certain foods, bingeing, hiding food, increased interest in food, drinking a lot;
- Excessive and compulsive levels of exercise - taking any opportunity to move as a chance to burn calories (e.g. offering to hand things out in class, or run errands). Distressed when planned exercise is cancelled;
- Frequent trips to the toilet to purge/exercise;
- Increased pressure to succeed - high achiever/performer;
- Thinking is rigid, black and white - struggles to make decisions (the brain does not function properly when starved); and/or
- Wearing baggy and layered clothing to disguise OR skimpy clothing to show weight loss.

### **Schools can make a difference by:**

- Open the door - **listening is the most important thing we can do**. Be open and comfortable talking about sensitive topics and aim to be consistent with your support, as well as build trusting relationships
- **Reviewing the messages we give students about healthy eating and exercise** - for example encouraging plenty of exercise is healthy, but some young people can become obsessive and over-exercise, or starve themselves to reach a target weight for competitive sports so be mindful
- **Noticing the warning signs and refer immediately** - early intervention is key for recovery
- **Having regular wellbeing check ins with pupils** - ask how they are often, and ask if everything is ok if you are concerned (we do more damage by NOT having these conversations)
- **Supporting the sufferer and the family/friends** while undergoing treatment



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For information and support:

- [www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk](http://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk)
- Self harm and eating disorders in schools, by Pooky Kinghtsmith
- Essential listening skills for busy school staff, by Nick Luxmoore
- BBC documentary - Freddie Flintoff: Living with Bulimia
- <https://www.childfeedingguide.co.uk/> - strategies and tools to tackle fussy eating in children

*PEN, February 2021*