

Guidelines for School Staff: Helping a Student with a Suspected Eating Disorder

Background: Disordered eating is common among youth and can go unnoticed for many months and years by parents, families, and school staff. Schools are often the entry point for recognition, early intervention, and treatment.

Early detection of disordered eating symptoms and accessing treatment are critical to healthy outcomes. Eating disorders are serious, life-threatening illnesses with both physical and psychological symptoms. The longer the disordered eating goes unnoticed, the greater the potential for it to develop into an eating disorder (i.e. anorexia or bulimia) and the longer it takes to recover.

Staff should be aware that the student and/or the family might not recognize a problem or be willing to accept help. Denial often is a symptom of eating disorders.

Signs and Symptoms of Disordered Eating

The greater the number of symptoms, the greater the risk:

- Fainting, dizziness, light headedness, low energy
- Weight loss or fluctuations
- Preoccupation with body and/or weight
- Reduced concentration, memory and thinking ability
- Mood changes – withdrawn, quiet, unhappy, irritable
- Skipping meals and/or won't eat with others
- Unusual eating rituals or changes in eating
- Drinking excessive amounts of water and/or tea
- Frequent trips to bathroom
- Excessive exercise
- Decline in school attendance

TAKE ACTION: Consult with a school counsellor/administrator if you see these signs and symptoms.

Talking to a Student Showing Signs and Symptoms of Disordered Eating

The goal of the discussion is NOT to provide a diagnosis but rather:

- To listen, to express concern for the student's overall health and well-being, and to gain an understanding of the student's perspective.
- To demonstrate warmth, compassion and care without judgement.
- To work with the student in involving the student's parents/guardians.
- To emphasize the importance of seeking medical care as soon as possible.
- To not comment on the student's weight loss or appearance.

Goals of informing the parent(s)/guardian(s):

- to share with parents/guardians your concerns regarding the student's health and well-being
- to support parents in accessing medical care and resources to help their child

Inform parents/guardians that you are concerned the student may be at risk of disordered eating. Tell parents that the earlier treatment begins, the better the chances are for a successful recovery.

Next Steps: Refer to needed services:

- Student's primary care physician or nurse practitioner

Resources and Information on Prevention, Identification, and Treatment:

- Embody (formerly Jessie's Legacy) <https://embodybc.com>
- National Eating Disorder Information Centre <https://nedic.ca/>
- Looking Glass Foundation <https://www.lookingglassbc.com/>
- Kelty Eating Disorders <https://keltyeatingdisorders.ca/>
- Here to Help BC <https://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/eating-disorders>