

UNDERSTANDING EATING DISORDERS

An Information Sheet from the Guidance Counsellor

Overeating and **obesity** can be problems for children and adolescents. These are often related to poor nutritional habits, stress, irregular family routine, busy lifestyle and food fads.

Adolescents are often very concerned about how their bodies compare to cultural norms of the “ideal” body. Those who are significantly disturbed about the size or shape of their bodies may develop eating disorders such as **anorexia nervosa** and **bulimia nervosa**.

Anorexia is characterised by a refusal to maintain a minimally normal body weight and an intense fear of gaining weight. Bulimia is characterised by binge eating and the use of inappropriate methods to prevent weight gain, such as self-induced vomiting, fasting, misuse of laxatives, diuretics and enemas, or excessive exercise.

Boys **and** girls can suffer from eating disorders, although they are more common among girls.

Studies among girls in late adolescence and early adulthood have found rates of **0.5%-1.0%** for anorexia nervosa and **1%-3%** for bulimia nervosa. More than **90%** of cases of anorexia nervosa and bulimia occur in females.

Although eating disorders are not common, they are serious and can be fatal. The thought of such problems can also generate anxiety among parents.

Without having a specific eating disorder, many young people struggle with self-image and self-worth problems related to their body image and physical appearance.

While each individual is unique, it is possible to identify some warning signs which are often observed in people who suffer from anorexia nervosa and bulimia. These are:

perfectionism

high levels of school achievement

low self-esteem

intense fear of gaining weight

irrational belief that they are overweight,

regardless of how thin they become

missing or avoiding meals with the family

making excuses for not eating, e.g., ate at a friend's place

binge eating

severe dieting

preoccupation with body image.

Many young people are successful at hiding the signs of eating disorders from their families and friends. People suffering from anorexia nervosa may lose weight dramatically or more gradually while bulimia sufferers often maintain normal or close to normal weight.



If you would like more information about eating disorders or to discuss particular concerns, please contact Brian Thompson on 3839 4977.

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Anorexia nervosa rarely begins before puberty and many young people who develop this problem begin to show signs between the ages of 14 and 18. Sometimes the beginning of the problem is associated with a stressful life event, such as beginning secondary school, having an accident, family breakdown.

What parents and caregivers can do to assist young people who may be vulnerable to eating disorders.

Provide healthy, nourishing, balanced and regular meals.

Discuss proper nutrition with children.

Model healthy eating habits.

Actively resist destructive cultural expectations about the “perfect” body size and shape; promote uniqueness and individuality in children.

Build self-esteem by reinforcing positive behaviours instead of criticising destructive ones.

Compliment young people on their personality or character instead of on their appearance or weight.

Separate worth from accomplishments.

Avoid communicating messages about having to always do things perfectly.

Educate children and yourself about eating disorders.

Discuss non-food related issues such as career interests, relationships, hobbies.

Avoid trivialising eating disorders.

Seek professional help and model that it is okay to ask for help.

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Other sources of information and help:

Zig Zag Young Women’s Resource Centre on 3843 1823.

Isis Centre for Women’s Action on Eating Issues on 3392 2233.



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