



Eating Disorders and Schools:

A resource for
educators and
school support staff

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What is an eating disorder?

An eating disorder is a complex medical illness that has serious impacts on a person's mental and physical health. Eating disorders develop from behaviours related to eating, exercise, and weight gain or weight loss. Symptoms can be different for each type of eating disorder.

Usually, the person focuses too much on their weight and shape. This often causes extreme behaviour changes to control their food, exercise, and body.

The **most common** eating disorders are:

- Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder
- Anorexia Nervosa
- Bulimia Nervosa
- Binge Eating Disorder
- Other Specified Feeding or Eating Disorder (e.g., Atypical Anorexia Nervosa)

Eating disorders have the highest mortality (death) rate of any mental illness.

Early intervention is key. It is important to recognize that the person's symptoms are not lifestyle choices, a diet, or a cry for attention. It is an illness that the person cannot control, and they will need treatment and support to recover.

Who is at risk for an eating disorder?

Anyone can develop an eating disorder. Some people are more likely to develop an eating disorder because of their history or genetics. The influence of the current diet culture and weight stigma through social media and societal expectations places a greater emphasis on appearance. These unrealistic beauty standards affect how youth see themselves and can have a detrimental impact on someone who is struggling with their body image.

Signs and symptoms of an eating disorder

Biological and Physiological	Psychological and Emotional	Social
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Bradycardia (slow heart rate) · Arrhythmia (irregular heart rate) · Hypotension (low blood pressure) · Electrolyte abnormalities (affects organ function) · Osteoporosis (weak bones) · Possible changes in weight (not always present) · Infertility or loss of menstruation (your period stops) · Stunted growth (may not meet growth potential) · Dental cavities · Bone marrow suppression · Insomnia (are not able to sleep) and/or fatigue (tiredness) · Dizziness or fainting · Brittle and/or thinning hair · Indigestion and upset stomach · Swollen parotid glands and face (with bulimia) – this could look like “chipmunk cheeks” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Change in attitude - may be more defensive, irritable · Low mood · Intense emotions and changes in mood · Anxiety (increased worry, intrusive thoughts, anticipation, and avoidance) · Preoccupied with food and weight · Body checking (looking in the mirror, pinching, measuring their body parts, weighing themselves or comparing themselves with others) · Self-harm · Thoughts of suicide · Guilt, shame, self-blame · Flat affect (does not show expression on face), loss of sense of humour · Intense emotional reactions · Impaired cognitive functioning · Trouble concentrating and remembering · Feeling hopeless 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Isolation · Feeling disconnected · Trouble expressing emotions · Competitive, compares themselves to others · Irritable · Withdrawal from others · Distracted while engaged with others · Emotional dysregulation at home · Disconnected from family · Decreased socialization with peers and extra curricular activities · Misses school more frequently · Preoccupied (talks constantly about food, focuses on feeding others but not self, avoids eating with others)

At school, you may see the following warning signs:

- Throwing out lunches
- Changes in weight
- Focusing too much on eating, exercise, and health behaviours such as needing to eat healthy/clean/organic or being extremely physically fit.
- Pushing themselves in sports past the point of exhaustion or injury
- Trouble concentrating in class
- Isolation from peer group

Eating disorders are not always visible just by looking at someone.

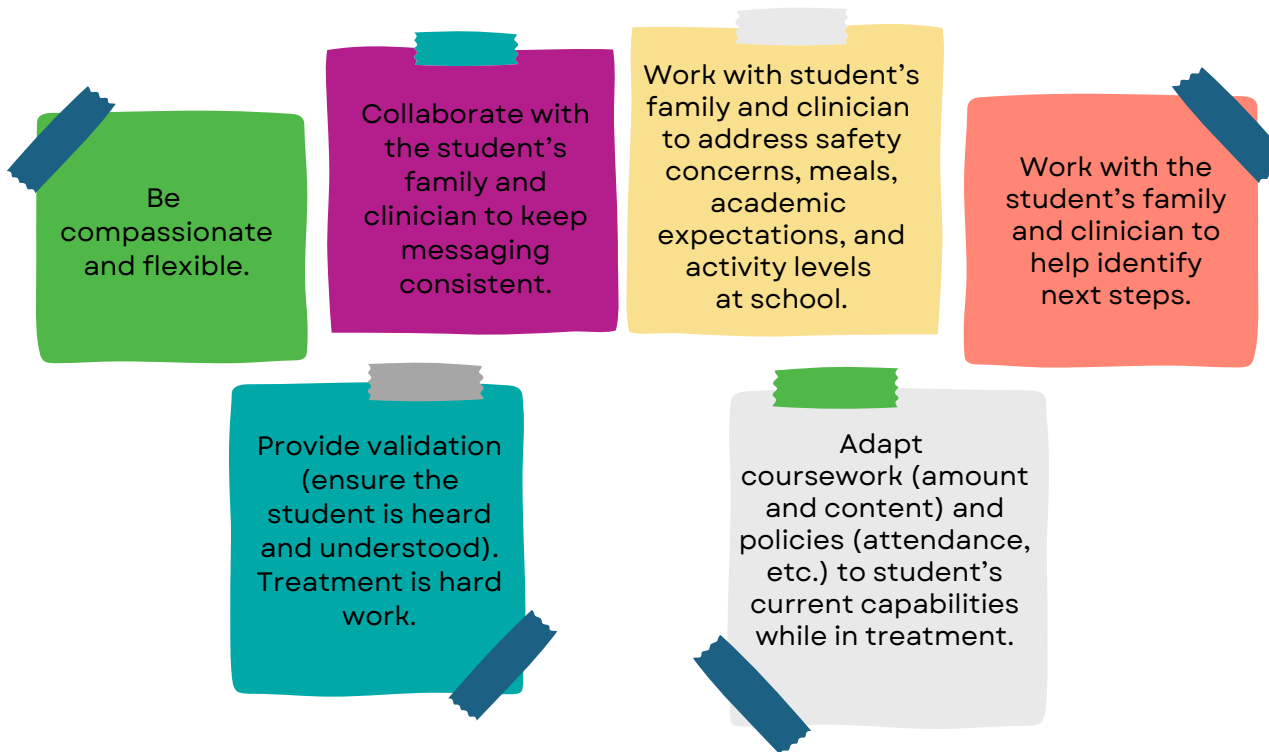
Often, students excel academically or athletically while experiencing an eating disorder. Although the diagnosis of an eating disorder is the responsibility of medical and mental health professionals, educators and support staff can support early intervention by observing behavioural and physical changes in students (Morgensen & Yiu, 2016).

What can educators and school support staff do?

Early intervention is crucial. If you are concerned about a student's eating or exercise habits, it is important to:

- **Express** your concerns privately to the student in a calm, non-judgmental manner. For example, *"I have noticed you seem to have less energy than usual and aren't spending as much time with your friends."*
- **Empathize:** Let them know you are concerned and that this must be hard to hear.
- **Listen:** Allow the student to be heard. Do not push if they are resistant to engaging or deny there is a problem.
- **Support:** Suggest they visit a health care provider such as their primary care clinician or local walk in clinic.
- **Limit:** Keep professional boundaries and follow best practices for intervention.
- **Engage** other school supports and family and/or caregivers if you are concerned that the student is not accessing needed services.
- **Respond:** If a student is showing any signs of medical distress such as chest pain, fainting, shortness of breath, call 911 right away.

Eating disorder treatment is intensive, as it impacts the brain and the body. It is important that school staff work with students, families, and clinicians to minimize impacts to school performance in all areas (academic, social, attendance, etc.).



Prevention

Educators can deliver food, body image, and health-based curriculums in ways that help to prevent eating disorders and disordered eating.

- ✓ Examine your own views and biases around food and body image. Be mindful of the messages you are sending students.
- ✓ Use evidence-based resources (see below) to inform lesson development.
- ✓ Create a positive environment that promotes asking for help and learn where to direct students and families for help.

Messaging Do's

- All foods fit as a part of healthy eating.
- Address weight stigma (discrimination based on a person's weight). Do not allow body and/or weight shaming.
- Acknowledge cultural contexts around food (like eating for enjoyment, social reasons, and celebrations).
- Enhance social media literacy.
- Ensure visuals in school represent all body types.
- Allow students to eat in as many settings as possible.
- Keep professional boundaries when teaching health-related curriculums. Ask yourself, "*Is this my personal view or an evidence-informed perspective?*"
- Build messages of self-esteem and self-determination.

Messaging Don'ts

- Do not label foods as 'good'/healthy or 'bad'/junk.
- Do not comment on a student's appearance or give advice on weight loss or exercise.
- Do not limit the types of foods families are allowed to send to school.
- Do not use BMI (body mass index) as an indicator of health.
- Do not ask or expect student athletes to change their weight.
- Do not glamorize or normalize disordered eating behaviours, or ritualistic or compulsive exercise.
- Do not teach students how to count calories, keep a food journal, or weigh themselves as a measure of health.

Treatment

Students and their families will work with a clinical team to find the treatment that is best for them. The student may need to temporarily withdraw from classes related to physical activity and/or health. Recovery can be time consuming, intensive, and exhausting for students and their families. School staff are an important part of the support network. While they are not expected to be involved directly in treatment, they can work with clinicians and families to provide a supportive environment for the student at meal and/or snack times at school, as needed.

Resources

- Eating Disorders Foundation of Canada. (n.d.). About Eating Disorders. [About Eating Disorders | Eating Disorders Foundation of Canada \(edfc.ca\)](https://edfc.ca/about-eating-disorders)
- National Eating Disorders Association. (2008). The National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) Educator Toolkit. Retrieved from www.nationaleatingdisorders.org
- The National Eating Disorders Collaboration. (2016). Eating Disorders in Schools: Prevention, Early Identification and Response. Retrieved from: <https://nedc.com.au/assets/NEDC-Resources/NEDC-Resource-Schools.pdf>

References

Morgensen, D. & Yiu, L.. (2016). Understanding Eating Disorders in BC Schools: A guide of trauma informed practices for school professionals. Retrieved from: [Understanding-Eating-Disorders-in-Schools.pdf \(keltyeatingdisorders.ca\)](https://keltyeatingdisorders.ca/Understanding-Eating-Disorders-in-Schools.pdf)

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