



Early Intervention and Prevention of Eating Disorders: A Resource For 16+ Students

By Jenny Tomei

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Hi Everyone,

I have produced this toolkit for young people, in order to equip you with the skills you need to identify eating disorder behaviours in yourself or a friend, and to get the necessary help.

Three things that are worth saying upfront:

- (1) an eating disorder is not actually primarily about food
- (2) it can affect anyone
- (3) people can and do recover.

I have looked to pack the most valuable information I can into this toolkit. However, information on its own is not enough. I know this, as someone who has both suffered from an eating disorder a few years ago myself, and who has since trained as an Eating Disorder Coach and Nutritional Therapist.

I believe that what's needed is a balanced, personal and holistic approach. I am particularly passionate about working to prevent and intercept eating disorders at an early stage, as I believe that this can make a really big difference.



Jenny Tomci

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What is an Eating Disorder?

An eating disorder is a serious mental illness that can have a significant effect on your health and wellbeing. The term refers to a potentially life-threatening condition, that is characterised by disturbances in eating, emotional and psychological distress, and physical symptoms. Eating disorders can be seen as a way of coping with emotional distress, or as a symptom of other underlying issues.

The current categories for eating disorders are: Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia Nervosa, and Binge Eating disorder. All of

these - as well as others Feeding and Eating Disorders Not Elsewhere Classified (FEDNEC), are concerned with control of weight and shape.

Just because somebody doesn't fit in absolutely with one particular category doesn't mean they don't have an eating disorder. Other conditions include compulsive eating, ARFID (avoidant restrictive food intake disorder) types of anorexia and bulimia which are not severe, Night Eating Syndrome, and Orthorexia, which is thought to be similar to anorexia.

How to spot the early signs of an Eating Disorder

If you're concerned that someone you know could have an eating disorder, then aside from obvious signs like fluctuations in weight, you might have noticed some changes to their relationship with food, exercise, and social interactions.

Keep a tab on all possible symptoms with the handy acronym, '**SOLD**':



SOCIAL WITHDRAWAL

Are they spending a lot of time alone, and eating in private? Do they avoid leaving the house, and skip out on plans to meet up with friends? These are clear indicators that they are putting control measures around food and mealtimes.



OVER-EXERCISING

Has their exercise regime quickly become a non-negotiable part of their day, whatever the circumstances? Do they seem to be exercising more than necessary or usual?



LOW MOOD

Do they seem more anxious and irritable? Are they increasingly sensitive and touchy? Have they developed a low self-image?



DIETARY CHANGES

Have they started to cut out various different types of food from their diet? Are they skipping meals? Do they seem preoccupied with counting calories due to fear of weight gain?

Disordered Eating vs Eating Disorders

It's important to know the difference between these terms, as they can sometimes be used interchangeably - when in fact, they represent two very different issues.

There are various ways that you could be said to have 'disordered eating', yet still not have an eating disorder. Disordered eating could mean anything from chaotic eating to simply not taking care of your eating habits. An example of this could be someone who doesn't prioritise food, or often skips meals, because they're depressed - these unhealthy food habits are a by-product of the person not looking after their wellbeing.

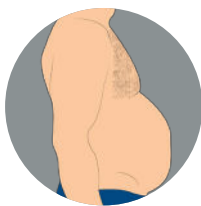
By contrast, an eating disorder is specifically connected with poor body image and occurs when someone attempts to control shape and weight in order to feel better about themselves. Behaving in a way that is harmful to your physical and emotional health because of concerns about weight and feeling fat are key signs of an eating disorder.

Therefore, in order to help yourself or a friend, it's important to acknowledge that an eating disorder is fuelled by issues with self-esteem and mood. It isn't simply a 'food' problem.

Eating Disorder Myths

False information and misconceptions are pretty common in the world of eating disorders - so it's important to be aware of them, and be able to tell facts from fiction.

Here's an example of some key eating disorder myths that we've busted wide open:



"You're not thin enough to have an ED"

False - eating disorders come in all shapes and sizes. As serious psychological illnesses, they cannot be fully assessed based on solely physical measures such as weight and shape.

In fact, most people with an eating disorder are not underweight, so it's not possible to tell whether someone has one just by looking at them.



"Only females develop Eating Disorders"

Totally wrong - eating disorders develop from low self-esteem, which is rife in both men and women. In fact, according to a 2019 survey conducted by NHS England, approximately one in eight of the men who took part screened positive for a possible eating disorder. While women with anorexia typically restrict their food in order to lose weight, men are more likely to aspire for building muscle and attaining the certain aesthetic body shapes that are promoted on Instagram and other social media. Rather than restricting, men therefore typically binge eat and then purge, as well as exercise excessively, and misuse steroids.



"Eating Disorder behaviours only focus on food"

Not at all. Individuals with eating disorders generally have an unhealthy focus on food, shape and weight - but it's important to be aware that the symptoms of an eating disorder can extend far beyond food. Scientific studies have shown links between eating disorders and obsessive traits like perfectionism in school or sports performance.



“Once someone with anorexia gains weight, they will be fine”

No - this is just the first step. Once an anorexia sufferer has returned to a weight that is healthy for them, this means they usually can participate more fully and meaningfully in psychotherapy. In these sessions, they will address the emotions behind their disorder, and come up with healthier coping strategies that they can rely on in times of stress - instead of turning to eating disorder behaviours. Weight recovery alone does not mean the eating disorder is cured.



“My loved one has bulimia, so they won’t develop another type of Eating Disorder”

Unfortunately, this isn’t necessarily the case.

Many people with eating disorders will suffer from more than one disorder before they ultimately recover. Some individuals show signs of both anorexia and bulimia simultaneously - for example, regularly binge eating, and then purging while retaining a critically low weight.

What are the risks of dieting

Severely restrictive diets can be very dangerous, especially when undertaken for a long period of time. Extreme or unhealthy dieting practices can often lead to feelings of guilt and failure due to binge eating, breaking diet ‘rules’, and any subsequent weight gain.

As young people who diet constantly are more likely to develop an eating disorder, dieting rarely has a positive influence on emotional and psychological wellbeing. In addition, half of all dieters put the weight back on - and sometimes this is more than the weight they lost.

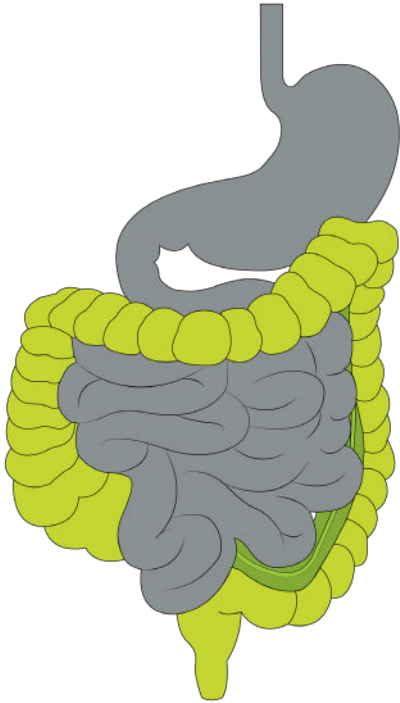
Short-term side effects of dieting:

- Low energy due to low blood sugar
- Excessive preoccupation with food, and feelings of being out of control around food
- Low mood and irritability
- Food restriction can lead to binge eating, which can lead to feelings of guilt and shame

Long-term side effects of dieting:

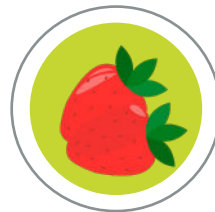
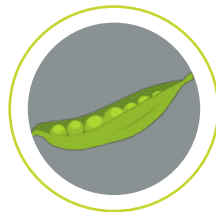
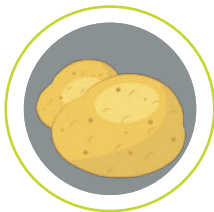
- Loss of muscle mass
- Hormonal imbalances (loss of menstrual cycle)
- Increased stress levels within the body
- Increased anxiety
- Slowed digestion - due to low intake of food which can result in constipation
- A slowed metabolism rate (your body will require fewer calories in order to function)
- Some diets restrict certain nutrients, such as carbohydrates, or complete food groups like dairy. When you aren’t eating balanced meals, you are probably missing out on some essential nutrients that can lead to deficiencies.
- Feeling cold all the time
- Loss of physical hunger cues

The side effects of dieting on our gut health



The gut hosts
70%
of the immune system, and is
the biggest organ in your body.

Home to a collection of microorganisms that's unique and specific to each individual, the health of the gut and intestinal microbiota is heavily influenced by a host of factors - including genetics, diet, health status, age, sex, and geographical location.



Carbs are an essential energy source for the good bacteria within our gut, but due to their negative reputation in the nutrition industry, many diets encourage us to cut them out. This can cause:

- Lower microbial diversity (associated with depression in Anorexia Nervosa)
- Constipation (due to lack of food intake and fibre)
- Slowed digestion - waste will sit around in the gut for longer due to lack of food/fibre intake

- An impaired immune defense
- Low levels of Short Chain Fatty Acids (Produced from the fermentation of dietary fibre, SCFA promote intestinal health, and strengthen gut barrier function. A strong gut barrier is essential for the absorption of certain nutrients and the reduction of gastrointestinal issues)

What is RED-S?

What is it?

Relative Energy Deficiency in Sport (RED-S) is the result of insufficient caloric intake and/or excessive energy expenditure, and affects males and females at all levels and ages.

What are the side effects ?

01.

Low bone mineral density which can lead to Impaired growth and development

02.

Impact on health and wellbeing, such as GI issues and an increase in gut permeability and Amenorrhea

03.

Long-term effects on performance

Recognition & Next Steps

01.

Look out for

- Perfectionist tendencies
- Disordered/restricted eating
- Frequent injuries/niggles
- Illness
- Menstrual dysfunction

02.

Seek medical help

Seeking medical help is an important first step, as other conditions must be excluded. Initiatives such as #TrainBrave have been established in order to increase awareness of RED-S, and combat any myths that encourage high-risk behaviours amongst athletes and active people.

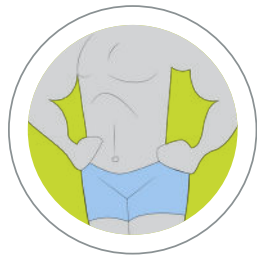
Perfectionism

Restricted eating and overtraining can put people at risk of development of RED-S. Perfectionism is often seen as a popular trait amongst sports people, and this is linked to eating disorders.

Athletes are rewarded for and sometimes picked out as having great potential because of their "excessive conscientiousness", "rigidity" and a "preoccupation with details" - all of which are personality risk factors for developing an eating disorder.

How to create a healthier relationship with your body

When a person has a positive body image, they understand that their sense of self-worth does not depend on their appearance. Here are four top tips for being kind and forgiving to your body, while keeping the importance of looks in perspective, and surrounding yourself with positive influences:



Grill those "goals"

Despite what fitness influencers might want us to believe, we can't all squat and abdominal crunch our way to six-pack abs, a tiny waist, and a massive bum. With bone structure and genetics playing a big part in the shape of our bodies, these 'fitness goals' are both unrealistic and unattainable for many people.



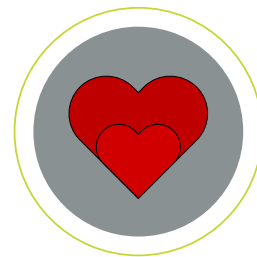
Munch and Move On

Spending the odd day overeating delicious foods and being relatively inactive is really not the end of the world, and will have no permanent impact on your physique. It's physically impossible to gain weight overnight from one 'bad' meal, so cut yourself some slack, and know that you've in no way permanently changed your body.



Finesse that Feed

Does scrolling down your Instagram feed make you feel good? If the answer is 'no', then perhaps it's time to build a better online tribe. Sure, seeing how the other half lives isn't a crime - but make sure those tiles still bear a resemblance to reality. You can't draw comparisons when you don't have all the facts. Remember - you don't know how much she posed or tensed for that shot, or how long she spent editing out any blemishes and adding more muscle tone to her thighs. Curate a feed that's inspiring, not intimidating.



Befriend your Body

When it comes to picking at our insecurities, we're all guilty of often blowing them up massively in our heads into totally unconstructive thoughts. We're so much harsher on ourselves than we would be to anybody else. If you heard a friend say something negative about their body, how would you react? Most likely, you'd tell her not to be so cruel, and you'd rattle off all of her physical attributes and personal qualities. Try doing it for yourself.

How to critique an Instagram photo?

While social apps like Instagram can be great for seeing what your friends are up to and sharing memories, it's important to remember that a person's feed is essentially a 'highlights reel' of their life.

Rather than allowing a 'perfect' photo to leave you feeling inadequate and self-conscious, make sure you're also taking note of the posed angles, filters and photo editing.

Here are **FIVE SIMPLE QUESTIONS** to ask yourself when critiquing an Instagram photo:

01. Do you think this is the only picture they took?

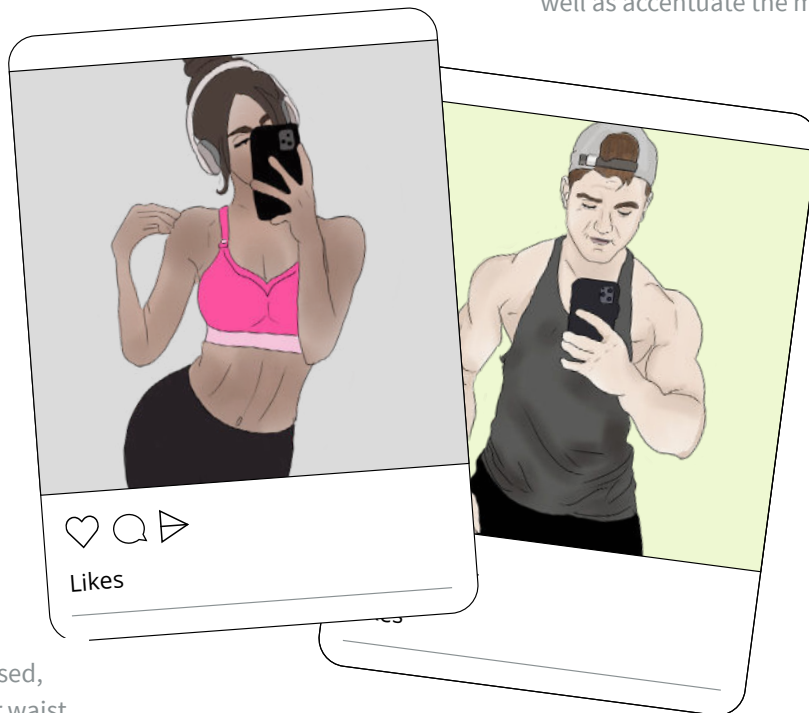
How many slightly different versions of a photo you posted on Instagram have you got in your camera roll? Be honest - the answer 's loads! Remember - just like you, they've probably picked the 'best' shot of the bunch.

02. Are they standing in a certain pose or at a particularly flattering angle?

Unless it's a picture that they're completely unaware is being taken, then it isn't an accurate representation of how they actually look. By posing, we can make our stomachs look flatter, as well as accentuate the muscles.

05. Are you sure it's a completely unedited photo?

While standard filters and effects are easy to spot, there are lots of editing apps out there that allow people to completely alter their appearance - without it being too obvious. Essentially, if there's a filter on the photo - they might look a little more tanned and therefore toned. But if editing apps have been used, they could have made their waist smaller, their lips bigger, and even slimmed down their thighs. You can't be 100% certain that any photo you see on Instagram isn't in some way edited.



03. What's the lighting like?

How much lighting there is, and whether it's natural or artificial, can massively change how the body looks. Similarly, LED make-up mirrors and ring lighting are popular choices for portrait shots because they reduce the shadows in the face by casting even light, which minimises the appearance of blemishes, and makes the eyes stand out. Remember - lighting choices make a massive difference.

04. Is it a 'post workout pic'?

If you follow a fitness influencer who only ever uploads posed gym pics, then don't be fooled into thinking that they always look that way. Remember - in all these heavily posed pictures they're not only most likely wearing compression leggings that accentuate the muscles and suck in the stomach, but their muscles are also still filled with blood from their workout, and are therefore engorged.

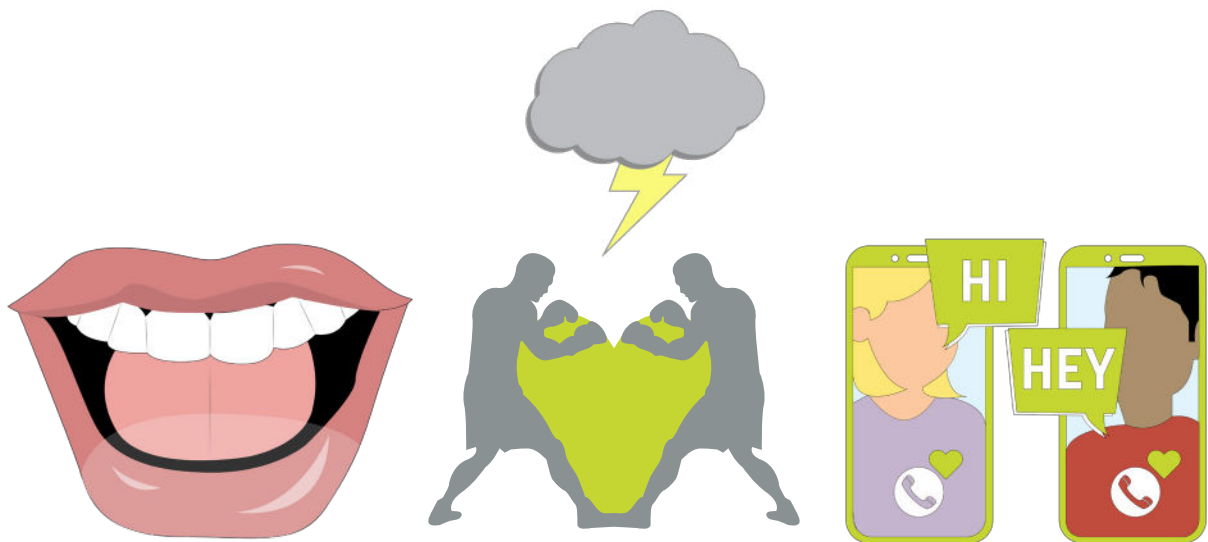
Understanding the connection between Thoughts, Feelings and Actions

It's important to understand how thoughts, feelings, and actions are connected, and how making a conscious effort to change your thoughts can therefore massively impact your actions.

To break it down: **THOUGHTS** are the words that run through your mind concerning a situation; **FEELINGS** are how the

situation sits with you emotionally; and **ACTIONS** are what you then do in response to these emotions.

Changing the way we think about triggering situations is crucial for changing our actions.



For Example:

TRIGGER: My friend skips a meal

MY THOUGHTS: “Why is he/she not eating, maybe I should do the same?”

MY FEELINGS: I feel guilty for eating

MY ACTIONS: I had a smaller portion of food instead



What could you have done instead?

TRIGGER: My friend skips a meal

NEW THOUGHTS: Why is he/she not eating?

NEW FEELING: That's not healthy. I am concerned about my friend

NEW ACTIONS: I ask my friend if he/she is okay, and I am here to talk if they need any help

How do I help a friend who is struggling?

There is no 'right' or 'wrong' way to talk to someone with an eating disorder. However, it is important to be prepared. The person may be experiencing high levels of anxiety, shame, embarrassment, guilt or denial, or may not recognise that anything is wrong. Any approach needs to be made in a caring manner, and in an environment which can support an open and calm conversation.

If you're approaching a friend at school, then it could also be useful to ask a trusted member of staff for help, or look into the intervention policies of your school.

Here are some handy **DO's** and **DON'Ts** for this first conversation:



DO

- Try to **USE** 'I' statements (e.g. 'I care about you,' 'I'm worried about you')
- Help them to feel it is **SAFE TO TALK TO YOU**
- Ask them how **THEY FEEL**
- **GIVE THEM TIME** to talk about their feelings
- **LISTEN RESPECTFULLY** to what they have to say
- Encourage them to **SEEK HELP**



DON'T

- **PUT THE FOCUS ON FOOD** - try talking about how the person is feeling instead
- **USE BLAME** (e.g. instead of saying e.g. 'You're making me worried', Instead say 'I am worried about you').
- **TAKE ON THE ROLE OF A THERAPIST** - you do not need to have all the answers. **JUST** be there to listen, and provide support.
- **USE MANIPULATIVE STATEMENTS** like 'think about what you are doing to me...'

Where can I go to get help for an Eating Disorder?

Whether it's for yourself, or for a friend you're concerned about, here are some useful links for information, treatment and recovery support.



Maudsley Centre for Child and Adolescent Eating Disorders

Providing treatment and recovery



Beat

National UK Charity for Eating Disorders



The Eating Disorders Association (EDA N.I.)

is a charity based in Belfast City Centre



Royal College of Psychiatrists

Comprehensive information about eating disorders



The National Centre for Eating Disorders

A non-profit organisation providing providing Eating Disorder treatment and recovery

How might JenUp be of support?

I have recently launched JenUp as an educational hub - primarily to provide early intervention, as well as to support those who are at the earliest stages of having an eating disorder.

As well as resources like blogs and podcasts, I also offer educational workshops and programmes - and to a select number of schools I can provide group coaching. See the website for latest details.

NB: This toolkit is one of three created by JenUp. Also available are our toolkits for parents and for teachers.

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