



Early Intervention and Prevention of Eating Disorders: A Resource For Parents

By Jenny Tomei

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Hi everyone,

I have produced this toolkit to give you a better understanding about Eating Disorders, and to outline what you can do as a parent to support your child.

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 the early prevention of Eating Disorders and by widely sharing some important information, we can all make a big difference.

Whether you are currently concerned about your child or you simply want to be more aware of the early signs and the impacts of eating disorders, you will gain valuable knowledge from this toolkit.



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 an Eating Disorder?

Children affected by eating disorders might be in complete denial about their condition, or on the other hand, may go to great lengths to hide the disorder due to feelings of guilt and shame. As a parent, you can play a vital role in not just identifying the eating disorder, but also helping your child to address the behaviours and any associated emotional distress.

If you suspect that your child has an eating disorder, then it's important to not just be on the look-out for weight

fluctuations, as changes to their relationship with food, exercise, and social interactions are equally key behaviours that need to be considered.

To ensure that you're keeping an eye on all possible indicators of an eating disorder, use 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?

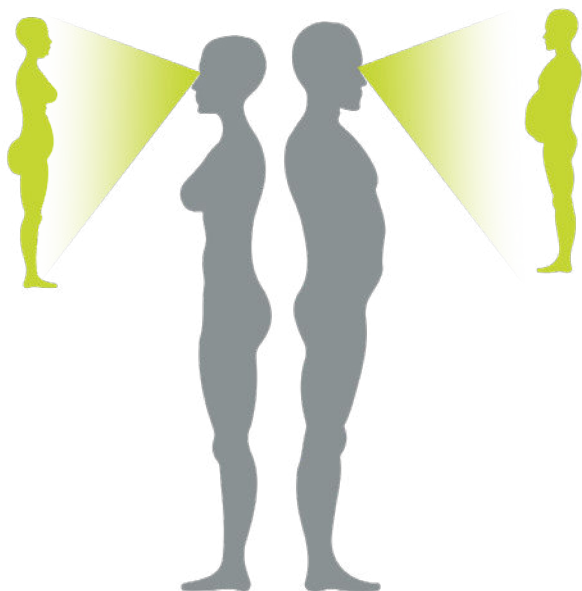


DIETARY CHANGES

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?

If you are noticing some or all of the above signs, then both educating yourself on the nature of eating disorders, and understanding the feelings behind these behaviours, are **KEY FIRST STEPS** for **SUPPORTING YOUR CHILD'S EMOTIONAL WELLBEING.**

Boys Get Eating Disorders Too



Although eating disorders are believed to be more common in women, it's important to remember that they are still very prevalent in men and boys - although they do present differently as a rule. Also, boys are less likely to seek help due to feelings of shame or embarrassment.

As mentioned previously, eating disorders typically start earlier with boys - so while males account for only 1-5% of total patients with anorexia nervosa, a shocking 50% of child sufferers are boys.

While women with anorexia typically restrict their food in order to lose weight, men are more likely to aspire to building muscle and attaining a certain aesthetic body shape. Rather than restricting, men therefore typically binge eat and then purge, as well as exercising excessively, and misusing steroids.

Disordered Eating vs Eating Disorders

It's important to know the difference between these terms, as they can sometimes be used interchangeably - when they in fact 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 their 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. Other signs are the frequency and severity of the behaviour and whether it relates to body image concerns.

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

How to approach your child if you suspect an Eating Disorder

If you believe that your child may be developing an eating disorder, it is important to speak with them about it as early as possible. Remember that eating disorders are not really about food, and that your child's emotional well-being must be the focus.

As a first step, you could try to gently encourage your child to talk to you about the situation. Try to be as visible as possible, and create some opportunities for your child to be around you with no specific focus, so they have plenty of

opportunities to open up to you with ease.

If they don't seem inclined to open up of their own accord, then it's important you take the lead and address it - as you don't yet know the severity of the situation, so starting a dialogue as early as possible is crucial.

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



DO

- **BE HONEST AND COMPASSIONATE** with no hint or judgement or criticism e.g. "I have noticed that your diet, and exercise routine has changed. Could you help me understand more about that?"
- **EXPRESS YOUR CONCERNS** e.g. "I am concerned about how you've been feeling lately"
- Remember that this is a big deal for your child, so they're probably feeling vulnerable. **SHOW EMPATHY** for the mix of emotions they might be experiencing, **ACKNOWLEDGE THE CHALLENGES**, and **OFFER UNCONDITIONAL LOVE AND SUPPORT**
- **BE PREPARED** for denial, resistance, silence, and even emotional outbursts
- **REASSURE** your child that you care about them, and that **YOU'RE AVAILABLE TO TALK**
- **CONSIDER** that your child may feel protective of their eating disorder, and while part of them may acknowledge and appreciate your concern, another part of them may interpret your concern as a threat to their coping mechanism
- **ASK** them to come to the family doctor with you



DON'T

- **BE PUT OFF** by silences, pauses, or a lack of immediate response.
- **ASK** them to make **IMMEDIATE CHANGES** in their behaviour
- **LIST** all of your own **FEARS AND CONCERNS**, as this may leave them feeling **OVERWHELMED AND GUILTY**.
- **SHY AWAY** from calling the emergency services when **MEDICAL RISK IS HIGH**. Emotional safety is also of paramount importance and parents should always respond to **SIGNS** that their loved one might be experiencing acute anxiety, depression, or suicidal ideation.

“

Empathy is feeling
with people.

”

Remember to consider:

It is important to remember that your child may feel protective of their eating disorder, and while part of them may acknowledge and appreciate your concern, another part of them may interpret your concern as a threat to their coping mechanism.

Children with eating disorders often feel that nobody understands them, and they are totally alone. Try to imagine what they are feeling, and listen carefully to their responses, as this can be a useful way of expressing empathy. Search Brene Brown Empathy on Youtube, “**EMPATHY IS FEELING WITH PEOPLE**”.

How your actions may be accidentally impacting your child’s relationship with food

Most importantly - don’t blame yourself, as eating disorders can be fuelled by a whole range of factors that were probably completely out of your control. However, once you’ve established that your child is struggling, it’s useful to consider how your actions and behaviours could be unhelpful. What are you thinking, feeling or doing that could be affecting your child’s attitudes and behaviour around food? See the example below.

What food means to us is learned in early life through the eating habits, beliefs and behaviours of our parents, and is influenced as we grow by other factors like friends, colleagues, and social media. We unconsciously acquire the possibly detrimental beliefs of the people around us, so make sure that the conversation at home surrounding food is positive.

Parent’s Actions

THOUGHTS: sweet foods are bad, I shouldn’t allow my child to have them
FEELINGS: fear of being a bad parent
ACTIONS: bans sweet foods



Child’s Actions

THOUGHTS: sweet foods are bad, but I like them
FEELINGS: fear of being found out
ACTIONS: hides sweet foods and eats in secret

The influence of social media

Concern with weight and shape is extremely common during the adolescent years - particularly amongst those with lower self-esteem, who turn to dieting because of body image dissatisfaction, and a general desire to be thinner. With self-esteem in young people largely defined by deemed successes and failures, not getting the likely unrealistic 'results' that they want can further fuel their poor opinion of themselves, and leave them at greater risk of developing an eating disorder.

Through cultural pressures and the power of social media, thinness has been equated with beauty, success and

health. Often unaware of the financial incentives, teens are targeted through sponsored ads and marketing schemes - often involving using popular 'influencers' to promote fad products - that want them to believe that they can get exactly the same kind of body as the heavily filtered and posed people they follow on Instagram.

The net result is that this cultural pressure to be thinner than necessary leaves many teens resorting to poor - and sometimes even dangerous - nutritional and lifestyle choices.

Unhelpful trends:



'What I eat in a day' videos

Supposedly documenting a normal day of eating, these videos typically just present the 'leanest' eating days, and are unrealistic for the average person. They can leave teens drawing unhealthy comparisons, questioning what they eat, and feeling like they need to change their diets. Our daily nutritional needs are dependent on height, weight, age, gender, muscle mass and activity level, so it's unlikely that following the daily diet of an influencer is adequate for a teenager.



Pro Ana groups

The terms "pro-anorexia" or "pro-ana", and "pro-bulimia" or "pro-mia", typically refer to online content that promotes the harmful behaviour and mindsets of eating disorders. People who post the content are often suffering from eating disorders themselves, so these spaces can become a very dangerous place for teenagers struggling with eating disorders to negatively influence each other. Pro Ana content/groups have been found on various different social media channels, including Tik Tok, Instagram and even Whatsapp.



Filters and editing apps

Instagram filters and photo editing apps are massively advanced, and allow users to remove blemishes, whiten teeth, and even change the shape of their face and cinch their waist. With so many people using them, it's easy for teenagers to not only assume that everybody naturally looks a certain way, but even more dangerously, it allows them to play about with what they 'could' look like if they were slimmer or more toned.

How to seek help for your child?

Below is also a list of other Eating Disorder services and information.
Talk to your local GP or contact your local community eating disorders services for more advice.

Other useful links

For more information about eating disorders, please see some useful links below.



Beat

National UK Charity for Eating Disorders



Maudsley Parents

A site for parents offering information on eating disorders and the family based treatment approach



Royal College of Psychiatrists

Comprehensive information about eating disorders



The Eating Disorders Association (EDA N.I.)
is a charity based in Belfast City Centre



The National Centre for Eating Disorders

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



Maudsley Centre for Child and Adolescent Eating Disorders

Provides treatment for young people suffering with Eating disorders



New Maudsley Carers, Kent

How to care for a loved one with an Eating Disorder

How might JenUp be of support?

I have recently launched JenUp as an educational hub - primarily to support those who are at the earliest stages of having an eating disorder, and to bring about the early prevention of eating disorders. As well as tools and resources (including blogs and podcasts), I also offer educational workshops and programmes. As a parent, you can either book a one-off personal confidential assessment with Jenny or attend an educational webinar. Group coaching at schools is also planned. See the website for latest details.

NB: This toolkit that you're reading is one of three created by JenUp.
Also available are our toolkits for teachers and for young people.

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