

■ Parents' Guide to Eating Disorders

EATING DISORDERS are very common but dangerous mental illnesses. Eating disorders are not the patient's choice or anyone's "fault," including parents. You can play an important role in getting the disorder under control and shepherding your son or daughter back to medical and emotional health.

■ WHAT ARE EATING DISORDERS?

Simply put, eating disorders are a set of mental illnesses with symptoms involving food and exercise. Once in place, an eating disorder can derail normal development. Although we do not yet know all the elements that lead to eating disorders, we know that they are not a choice, a matter of vanity, or a result of parenting. Powerful biological, nutritional, and genetic processes are clearly involved.

■ DIFFERENT TYPES OF EATING DISORDERS

Eating disorders all involve eating disturbances.

- ▶ Anorexia nervosa involves restriction of food.
- ▶ Bulimia nervosa involves cyclical restriction, bingeing, and purging of food.
- ▶ Binge eating disorder involves periodic food binges.

Most patients with eating disorders do not fall neatly into these categories and are given a diagnosis of other specified feeding or eating disorder (OSFED) or unspecified feeding or eating disorder (UFED), but these diagnoses are just as serious.

■ COMMON BUT TREATABLE SET OF CONDITIONS

Eating disorders are surprisingly common. One percent of adolescents develop anorexia nervosa, and 3% develop bulimia nervosa. The combination of OSFED and UFED are found in an estimated 5%. In addition, disordered eating behaviors are very common and dangerous. Eating disorders do not discriminate; they affect millions of Americans, cross all racial and socioeconomic lines, and occur in males and females.

■ WILL OUR CHILD GET WELL?

With your help in finding, supporting, and participating in treatment, the chance of full recovery is high. This requires enormous self-education, prioritization, and working well with all other adults in your son's or daughter's life. You will also need to carefully select and collaborate with the treatment team. It is critical that you seek out treatment that is evidence-based and offered by well-trained, experienced professional teams.

Although there are many options for treatment, not all are based on solid evidence, and some may be a waste of precious time or even harmful.

■ FOOD IS MEDICINE

Restoring normal eating, weight, and exercise is the initial priority in regaining mental health when it comes to an eating disorder. Without normal eating and digestion, the thoughts and compulsions of the mental illness cannot resolve.

■ MEDICATIONS AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

Although there are no drug therapies for eating disorders, they can often play a role during treatment for other psychiatric conditions that may be present. Psychotherapy of various forms are also useful during recovery to understand the illness, learn coping skills, resolve psychological issues, restore relationships, gain insight, and prevent relapse.

■ NEWER METHODS OF TREATMENT DON'T BLAME PARENTS—THEY INCLUDE THEM

There are many types of treatment; each family should carefully consider the options. The most promising intervention for children and adolescents is called family-based treatment or Maudsley. Unlike other forms of family therapy, this approach coaches parents and siblings on how to support the patient, not the eating disorder, and restore eating and normal relationships. Other approaches and additional elements of treatment should also be considered. Finding the right fit and adapting over time are important elements of caregiving.

■ STAY ON THE SAME PAGE

The anxiety of interrupting disordered eating patterns can lead to arguments with the patient and among caregivers. Yet divisions between parents and between families and treatment providers generally lead to more anxiety. Ill loved ones need to know that their parents and professional team are confident and consistent. It is critical to remember that you, the therapist, and

other team members are very likely to be unpopular early in treatment, and this doesn't necessarily mean that anyone is doing anything wrong—it may mean that they are doing everything right!

■ PERSEVERING

Expect to feel weary and discouraged at times. This is an exhausting illness, and feeling tired does not mean the treatment is not working. Concentrate on your strengths and how your hard work is key to success.

■ THE GOAL

The goal of eating disorder treatment is not just survival; it is true health. Full recovery means enjoying age-appropriate activities; maintaining a healthy weight, satisfying relationships, and good emotional regulation; and learning independence.

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