Identifying Eating Disorders in your Children

What are eating disorders?

Eating disorders are behavioural conditions identified by consistent disordered eating behaviours, accompanied with upsetting feelings and thoughts. Eating disorders are particularly frequent in Western countries, and often begin during adolescence. They can affect all genders, and have been observed to be increasing.

Eating disorders are often characterised by a preoccupation with shape, weight, and food, and anxiety around eating, which then manifests through disordered eating behaviours. Differentiating it from other forms of abnormal eating behaviour, such as food phobias, and selective eating.

Common health and medical issues that can result from this, include malnutrition, poor growth, menstrual inconsistencies, fatigue, mood changes, and constipation.

What are the types of eating disorders?

Although this is still an expanding area, there are currently six diagnosable forms of disordered eating: anorexia, bulimia, binge eating disorder, other specified feeding and eating disorder, avoidant restrictive food intake disorder, pica, and rumination disorder.

External behaviours vary depending on the type of eating disorder, but include avoidance or restriction of food, binge eating, self-induced vomiting, excessive exercise, and laxative use. Internal psychological aspects can often accompany it, such as low self-esteem, perfectionism, emotional problems, and body image concerns.

There also are factors that can increase the risk of eating disorders such as; childhood obesity, critical remarks from family or friends about weight or eating, low self-esteem, lack of social support, and parental pressure and disinterest.

How to identify an eating disorder:

Given that dieting behaviours are very common and cultural attitudes towards food vary, it can be difficult to identify an eating disorder from non-harmful irregular eating behaviours. Those who are struggling with eating disorders usually try to hide symptoms and behaviours, through wearing loose clothing to hide their weight, avoiding certain social situations, like going to a pool or environments where they may have to eat. The secretive nature of the disorder can lead to an avoidance for help-seeking, due to a belief that they are not in danger and the stigma around diagnosis of eating disorders.

Additionally, many children demonstrate early symptoms of disordered eating which can predict weight gain or loss, body dissatisfaction, and eating disorders. Many symptoms are observable, and you should trust your intuition. Some common signs to look out for include:

* rigidity around eating and food choices, such as counting calories on food packaging, not using cutlery, avoiding high calorie foods, skipping meals, and hiding food or not eating in front of others
* health symptoms, such as fatigue, being cold, or feeling sick after eating
* emotional concerns, such as mood swings, social withdrawal, anxiety, and low self-esteem
* shape concerns, such as weight loss or gain, excessive control of weight, dissatisfaction with body shape, wearing baggy clothes to hide their body shape, comparisons to others around them, and prolonged fixation with appearance
* other symptoms, such as disappearing to the bathroom following meals, constant snacking, and obsessive exercise

What to do:

Eating disorders are often difficult to diagnose, as those suffering often minimise their symptoms or deny them. Early identification and treatment can be essential in preventing perpetuation and the risk of major health issues. As a parent you can seek professional help for your children, and advice on how to best move forward based on their specific circumstances, although treatment and diagnosis will require your child’s willingness to receive support.

Being open, honest, and non-judgemental can all help to alleviate the feelings of stigma and encourage your child to speak freely with you. Asking your child questions such as how do you feel about your body? And how would you like your body to look? Can help to assess whether they are struggling with an eating disorder. However, it is important to take care when asking these kinds of questions, due to the triggering nature of them.

Additionally, there are steps you can take to prevent eating disorders from arising, such as building self-esteem, transparency and education on eating disorders and their impacts, encouraging healthy eating behaviours and attitudes, and critical education on media attitudes towards body appearance.

Find more information and support at:

Beat:

Helpline: 0808 801 0677

Website: beateatingdisorders.org.uk

Samaritans:

Helpline: 116 123

Website: Samaritans.org