



## REMEMBER

- People with disordered eating use their behaviours around food to deal with uncomfortable or painful emotions. Restricting food can be used to feel in control. Overeating temporarily soothes sadness, anger, or loneliness. Purging is often used to combat feelings of helplessness and self-loathing.
- As illogical as it may seem to you, the young person is having a deep need being met through their behaviour. Because it feels like it works, stopping feels like a loss.
- Conversations around disordered eating can feel very threatening. Don't take it personally if the person becomes angry or defensive. When this happens, try to remain calm, focused, and respectful. Make it clear that you'll be there in whatever way they need, whenever they're ready.
- Inviting someone into places of belonging and significant contribution - right in the middle of the messiness - illustrates that God has a place for them in his heart no matter what.



## RECOGNIZE

- Disordered eating is an outward manifestation of inner pain. It is an attempt to find some control in a world that feels full of anxiety, uncertainty and powerlessness.
- Keep an eye out for teens with low self-esteem whose focus and conversation keep going back to their body, appearance and weight.
- You may notice increasingly restrictive eating patterns, eating to the point of discomfort, hiding food, disappearing into the bathroom after every meal, eating alone/fear of eating with others, increased irritability, intense/rigid exercise routines, changing clothing style to hide their body size, and loss of interest in the things that used to bring pleasure.
- Disordered eating can lead to heart problems, kidney damage, reproductive issues, memory loss, and eventually death if left untreated.



## RESPOND

Recovering from disordered eating is a long and difficult path. Those who have walked this road say that it involves making major changes in patterns of eating and activities around food, walking away from weight control methods, viewing their bodies differently, and learning how to embrace and express their emotions in healthy ways. This does not happen overnight and definitely doesn't happen because someone in their world forces these changes on them. So what can we do?

- **Be gentle but direct in discussing your concerns.** Tell them what you've noticed and that you suspect they have some deep feelings stuck inside. Let them know their feelings matter, you're concerned and you want to help them find help.
- **Don't give your 'advice' on better eating or exercise habits.** Focus on feelings not weight and food. Offer support & leave diagnosis/treatment to professionals.
- **Don't over simplify.** Disordered eating is not the same as other addictive behaviours and it's not a simple change of behaviour that is needed. Remember that this is about more than food and it's not your job to make them eat.
- **Watch your words.** Don't criticize their eating patterns or comment on their appearance (even if you think it's a compliment). They will feel a lot of shame around their behaviour. Don't let words that feel like measurements add to that.

• **Don't get distracted by the behaviours.** Your relationship is with them, not their disorder. Encourage and affirm that.

• **Find a team.** It will take a wider community of professionals to assist the teen through healing and coming to health—including a doctor who understands disordered eating (not all do), a counsellor, and supportive friends. Work with them and their parents if possible to help create a team and a plan.



## RESOURCES

For links to further resources, tools, and info for this topic, scan the QR code or visit

[resourcesjsl.org](http://resourcesjsl.org)



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