

Students and Eating Disorders: A Guide for Health Educators

Compiled by Kathy Kater, LICSW and the National Eating Disorders Association

Being a student can be overwhelming—between school work, social politics and balancing extra-curricular activities, jobs, friends and family, there are a lot of stressors. These include normative pressures about appearance, weight, eating and exercise. During this tenuous time, mental health problems, including eating disorders, may manifest. Many students do not have access to the necessary support systems for early intervention.

School administrations should invest in a campus environment that encourages mental and physical wellness, provides supportive services to students in need and gives staff and students the tools to help those who may be struggling.

How to Help a Concerned Student

A student is concerned about their eating habits or weight, and comes to you for help—now what?

1. **Listen openly and reflectively.** It's a great sign that they felt comfortable enough to open up to you. Keep the momentum going by giving them a chance to express all of their feelings.
2. **Let the student know that their concerns are valid and eating disorders are serious.** By coming to you, they've shown maturity and a desire to get help. Reinforce and validate their feelings.
3. **Ask the student what they would like to do next.** Are they ready to speak to their parents or guardian? Do they want to practice that conversation with you? Set some solid next steps—you don't need to find a solution, you just need to keep the conversation going.
4. **Make a plan for a follow-up meeting.** Set a specific date and time. If you aren't able to schedule a meeting, then find time for a brief, discreet chat. Make it clear that you care about them and take their concerns seriously.
5. **In all situations, consult your organization's ethical guidelines, your state's laws and your school's policies.** Some schools may be bound by strict protocols and reporting structures, while others may allow teachers to contact parents directly.*

***If you are concerned that this may be a medical emergency, consult your school's guidelines and contact 911.**

What if a Student is Concerned About a Friend?

If a student is concerned about their friend, follow the same steps listed above. Listen openly and reflectively, validate their concerns and make plans for next steps. Ask the student if they are ready to talk to their friend about their concerns, and if they would like you to be a part of that discussion. Provide resources they can share with their friend.

Establishing a Healthy School Culture

- Organize eating disorders screenings and share NEDA's screening tool link (myNEDA.org/screening) with parent groups.
- Make sure staff is familiar with the primary cultural risk factors for eating disorders: 1) fear of fatness and body dissatisfaction, 2) the belief that restrictive eating is a good method for preventing or reducing fatness, and 3) engaging in restrictive eating (dieting). Staff should also know that eating disorders can occur in people who range from very thin to very heavy. It could be a serious mistake to think, "This student doesn't look like they have an eating disorder."
- Incorporate staff and parent education about eating disorders signs and symptoms, and about prevention of the primary cultural risk factors mentioned above.
- Any efforts to improve your school's overall health should be weight-neutral; weight stigma reliably leads to body image concerns and disordered eating even in those who are not at risk for a diagnosable eating disorder. Through lessons, posters and conversations, actively promote size diversity, positive body esteem and healthy lifestyle behaviors for all, regardless of size.
- Create an environment in which students feel they can approach trusted staff members with concerns about themselves or their peers. Early intervention significantly improves the likelihood of eating disorder recovery.
- Update school anti-harassment and antidiscrimination policies to ensure they include appearance, body shape and weight. Ensure that a protocol is in place for students to report teasing, bullying, or harassment based on these factors. Consequences for bullying behavior should be clearly outlined and communicated to students.

Resources to Keep in Your Office

Keep resources readily available for all students to pick up discreetly. Some students may not feel comfortable sharing their feelings, but would like to learn more about eating disorders and how to get help.

- **NEDA brochures**
- **A list of local eating disorders treatment professionals:** www.myNEDA.org/find-treatment.
- **NEDA's Helpline:** (800) 931-2237
- **NEDA Click to Chat:** www.myNEDA.org/helplinechat
- **NEDA's youth website:** Proud2Bme.org
- **Online eating disorder screening:** myNEDA.org/screening
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** 800-273-8255
- **Trevor Lifeline:** 866-488-7386

Learn more about eating disorders and how to help your students:

Download NEDA's Educator Toolkit: www.myNEDA.org/educator-toolkit.

NEDA's Helpline: 800-931-2237; www.myNEDA.org/helplinechat

Contact a NEDA Network member in your area: www.myNEDA.org/neda-network

National Eating Disorders Association
165 West 46th Street Suite 402
New York, NY 10036

212-575-6200
www.nationaleatingdisorders.org