



EATING DISORDERS



IN THE WORKPLACE



National Eating Disorders Association

Maintaining a healthy workplace environment is vital to the happiness and productivity of your organization. If an employee or coworker is struggling with an undetected eating disorder or disordered eating, it can take a major toll on them. Encourage eating disorders screenings to improve overall workplace wellness and to get help to those who need it.

WHAT ARE EATING DISORDERS?

Eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, binge eating disorder, and OSFED (other specified feeding or eating disorder), are complex medical and psychiatric illnesses that can have serious consequences for health, productivity, and relationships. They are bio-psycho-social diseases caused by both genetic and environmental factors and are not fads, phases, or lifestyle choices.

Eating disorders are marked by extreme emotions, attitudes, and behaviors surrounding weight and food issues. In the United States, 20 million women and 10 million men suffer from a clinically significant eating disorder at some time in their life. These disorders have the highest mortality rate of any mental illness and can become very serious, chronic, and life-threatening if not recognized and treated appropriately. The earlier a person seeks treatment, the greater the likelihood of physical and emotional recovery.

WHAT ARE THE WARNING SIGNS OF AN EATING DISORDER?

- In general, behaviors and attitudes indicating that weight loss, dieting, and control of food are becoming primary concerns.
- Evidence of binge eating, including disappearance of large amounts of food in short periods of time or finding wrappers and containers indicating the consumption of large amounts of food.
- Evidence of purging behaviors, including frequent trips to the bathroom after meals, signs and/or smells of vomiting, or presence of wrappers or packages of laxatives or diuretics.
- Excessive, rigid exercise regimen—despite weather, fatigue, illness, or injury, the compulsive need to “burn off” calories taken in.
- Withdrawal from usual friends and activities.

IT'S TIME TO TALK ABOUT IT

Early intervention saves lives, and our online screening only takes three minutes.

Make this screening tool available for employees:

www.myneda.org/screening

HOW CAN EATING DISORDERS AFFECT THE WORKPLACE?

Eating disorders can affect anyone. High-performing, dedicated employees may struggle with disordered eating and poor body image, impairing otherwise excellent performance. Organizational leadership should encourage a welcoming and inclusive workplace, optimizing employee productivity and wellness.

As with many illnesses, eating disorders have serious health effects that, gone untreated, may lead to lost productivity and long-term medical problems. Early intervention and treatment are the best measures to ensure proper management of medical problems and encourage recovery.

Medical complications of eating disorders may include, but are not limited to:

ANOREXIA NERVOSA	BULIMIA NERVOSA	BINGE EATING DISORDER
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heart failure • Osteoporosis • Muscle loss and weakness • Kidney failure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heart failure • Gastric rupture • Tooth decay • Peptic ulcers and pancreatitis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heart disease • Type II diabetes mellitus • Gallbladder disease • High cholesterol

In any situation, make sure to review your company's human resources policies.

Questions? Visit www.myNEDA.org for eating disorders information, resources, and treatment options.

HOW CAN YOU HELP YOUR WORKPLACE?

1. EDUCATE YOURSELF

Learn more about signs and symptoms of disordered eating. NEDA's website offers a comprehensive overview of eating disorders information: www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/learn.

2. SHARE YOUR CONCERNS—RESPECTFULLY

- If you are concerned about someone at work, whether you approach them directly or go through human resources channels will depend on the nature of your relationship to that person.
- Regardless of your relationship to the individual, everyone has a right to privacy and confidentiality. Concern for another's well-being should only be expressed to a human resources staff member or to the person directly, never to other colleagues.
- If someone at work chooses to disclose their eating disorder to you, listen openly and reflectively, without judgment. Don't make accusations, use "I" statements, communicate your concern and support, and encourage them to speak with a professional.

DID YOU KNOW?

Help-seeking decreases significantly when people are not aware of the options available to them.

(Ben-Porath, 2002; Friedman, 2009; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2006; Gould, 2007)

3. SCREEN & INTERVENE

Early intervention and treatment are the best measures to encourage recovery.

Work with your HR department to organize an office screening: www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/screening.

4. TAKE IT TO HR

If you are not a part of your organization's human resources department, share this information with them:

- NEDA's screening tool, www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/screening, can be incorporated into existing health and wellness programs.
- Keep resources—such as NEDA brochures and information on company health plan benefits—readily available for all employees to review and take home. Employees who are concerned about a loved one's health could benefit from access to NEDA's resources: www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/learn.
- Reinforce confidentiality and provide information on company-sponsored health benefits.
- Consult resources like the Job Accommodation Network (JAN)'s Accommodation and Compliance Series document on eating disorders: <https://askjan.org/media/eating.html>.
- Contact NEDA or local nonprofit organizations for more information on local resources. Consider keeping a list of local providers available for your employees.

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FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQ)

WHAT ABOUT WORKPLACE WELLNESS PROGRAMS?

Workplace wellness programs that promote mental and physical health can be beneficial, as long as the focus is not on weight or weight loss. Avoid any programs that call for competition and weigh-ins. Programs involving exercise and weight management should be strictly voluntary. Compulsory participation may contribute to the development of negative body image and could even contribute to the onset of disordered eating.

If you are concerned about a workplace wellness program's potentially deleterious effects, share your concerns with your HR department.

HOW ABOUT EMPLOYEES CARING FOR A LOVED ONE WITH AN EATING DISORDER?

Employees and coworkers may be affected by the eating disorder of a loved one. Supporting a loved one struggling with an eating disorder can be emotionally and mentally demanding. Flexibility at the workplace can allow employees to maintain balance in their lives while helping their loved one to recover. NEDA's Parent Toolkit may be helpful to those supporting a loved one: www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/parent-toolkit.

HOW CAN A WORKPLACE PROMOTE A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE?

There's nothing wrong with promoting a healthy lifestyle. In fact, mental health is an integral part of our overall wellbeing, so any successful workplace health initiative should also prioritize and promote mental health.

Take a look at the messaging around your workplace—are there signs promoting calorie counting, messages that weight is the primary determinant of health, or any other suggestions that may be harmful to someone in recovery from or predisposed to an eating disorder? Speak with your human resources department about the messages your workplace is sending—letting them know that this is an issue that matters to their employees may inspire real change, which could save lives.

DOES MY WORKPLACE INSURANCE PLAN INCLUDE COVERAGE FOR EATING DISORDERS?

For any specific questions about your workplace insurance plan, speak with your company's human resources department or your insurance representative. Share your questions and request a copy of your complete insurance policy. It's important to read your policy in full and to understand what your insurance covers. Insurance companies routinely deny coverage for treatment, and you should be prepared to fight for the coverage you're entitled to.

Visit www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/insurance-resources for sample letters to use with insurance companies and guidance on managing an appeals process.

Encourage a healthy workplace by promoting a balanced lifestyle, offering resources to those who need them, and providing education and screenings. Health and wellness are vital to maintaining a happy workplace and optimizing employee productivity.

In any situation, make sure to review your company's human resources policies.

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