

Eating Disorders in College

Helping a Family Member
or Friend in Need

The transition to a college campus and a new freedom-filled life leads students to create new life paths and lasting relationships. What can we do when this major transition contributes to an eating disorder?

An eating disorder is not a disorder of choice, but rather a genetic predisposition that can be triggered by any number of life-changing events, such as the transition to college. As the deadliest mental illness, eating disorders extend far beyond a simple issue with food. Therefore, early intervention is critical. The support of family and friends during the initial diagnosis and struggle can be instrumental in helping someone seek treatment and achieve a sustained recovery from an eating disorder.

Recognizing the Warning Signs

How do you know when there is cause for concern? Look for the following warning signs, which may indicate an eating disorder.

Warning Signs of Anorexia Nervosa

- Dramatic weight loss; a preoccupation with weight, food, calories, fat grams and dieting; denying hunger.
- Frequent comments about feeling “fat” or overweight despite weight loss and withdrawal from usual friends and activities.
- Development of food rituals and excuses to avoid mealtimes or situations involving food. An excessive, rigid exercise regimen - despite weather, fatigue, illness or injury.

Warning Signs of Bulimia Nervosa

- Evidence of binge-eating, including disappearance of large amounts of food in short periods of time and evidence of purging behaviors, including frequent trips to the bathroom after meals, signs and/or smells of vomiting and presence of laxatives or diuretics.
- Creation of complex lifestyle schedules or rituals to make time for binge-and-purge sessions and/or an excessive, rigid exercise regimen - despite weather, fatigue, illness or injury.
- Unusual swelling of the cheeks or jaw area, a discoloration or staining of the teeth, and/or calluses on the back of the hands and knuckles from self-induced vomiting.

Intervening When It Matters Most

Eating disorders do not only impact the individual suffering. These diseases impact the entire support system including family, friends, roommates and educators. The National Eating Disorders Association (<http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org>) offers the following tips and recommendations for approaching a friend or family member should a concern about their eating and/or exercise habits arise.

- **Set aside a time to talk.** Find a time and place for a private, respectful meeting to discuss your concerns. This can help someone feel cared for and supported when dealing with this severe mental illness. When communicating your concerns, try to avoid conflict or struggles. If your friend or family member denies the existence of a problem, simply restate your reasons for concern and leave yourself open and available as a supportive listener.
- **Overcoming an eating disorder is not a simple task.** When voicing your concerns, try to avoid “you” statements such as, “You just need to eat.” Instead, focus on “I” statements that convey your worry and concern for your friend or family member’s wellbeing. Furthermore, continue to express your support as they enter into treatment.



Understanding Their Limits

The complexity of college life may be an emotional overload for individuals predisposed to an eating disorder. Taking a few precautionary steps can ensure your friend or family member's eating disorder does not spiral out of control.

Providing Support During and After Treatment

Providing support means learning how to respond and interact with someone with an eating disorder. TeensHealth (<http://www.kidshealth.org>) offers the following advice for supporting your friend or family member who is struggling with an eating disorder.

- Avoid talk about food, weight, diets or body shape - your own, your family member's, your friend's or even a popular celebrity's.
- Avoid being too watchful of your eating habits, appetites and choices.
- Focus on their strengths.
- Avoid focusing on how your friend or family member looks physically.

Using Your Resources

Be aware of college or university resources. Counseling services, advisors and teachers, student health facilities, resident assistants and local medical professionals are available to offer advice, support and recommendations for treatment.

If an eating disorder escalates, your friend or family member may need to seek treatment at a facility specializing in eating disorder care. A variety of treatment centers across the country offer different specializations and treatment options, as well as the ability to treat patients requiring different levels of care. It is important to choose a treatment facility based on what fits your friend or family member's needs in order to experience a lasting recovery.

Eating Recovery Center in Denver, Colorado, can be a valuable partner as you seek treatment for yourself, a friend or a family member.

"Try living at home, taking part-time classes or even utilizing a gap year...or two," suggests Enola Gorham, MSW, LSW, and Program Director of Eating Recovery Center. "It is always beneficial to be in treatment, have a therapist or take part in eating disorder support groups to achieve and maintain a long-term recovery."

Remember...

- ... eating disorders do not discriminate.
- ... individuals are predisposed to an eating disorder based on genetics and previous behaviors.
- ... 90 percent of eating disorder patients are diagnosed between 18 and 25.
- ... an estimated 10-15 percent of people with anorexia or bulimia are male.
- ... as many as 10 percent of college women suffer from an eating disorder.



About Eating Recovery Center

Eating Recovery Center, situated at the foot of the Rockies in beautiful downtown Denver, Colorado, provides individuals 17 and older sustainable treatment for eating disorders in a warm, nurturing environment. Our comprehensive program offers patients from across the country a continuum of care that includes inpatient, residential, partial hospitalization, intensive outpatient and outpatient services in a behavioral hospital setting. Our compassionate team of professionals collaborates with treating professionals and loved ones to cultivate lasting behavioral change. For more information please contact us at 877-825-8584 or info@EatingRecoveryCenter.com or confidentially chat live on our website at www.EatingRecoveryCenter.com.