

## **Debunking Myths of Eating Disorders**

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Despite a rise in the frequency of eating disorders in the United States, widespread misunderstandings regarding eating disorders persist, making detection, diagnosis, and early intervention difficult. Everyone should be aware and learn the reality behind common eating disorder myths in order to genuinely safeguard and advocate for their children. The first myth is that “eating disorders are exclusively a female problem”. While research indicates that eating disorders impact much more women than males, these conditions also afflict men and boys. Males used to make up approximately 10% of people with eating disorders, but according to a new Harvard research, they now make up closer to 25% of those seeking eating disorder treatment. Furthermore, among healthcare professionals, the common perception that eating disorders primarily afflict women and girls can delay appropriate identification of an eating problem in a male or boy.

Another myth that is famously thought of is “only skinny people have eating disorders”. While anorexia is defined by dramatic weight loss, many people who experience other eating disorders are not underweight. In many situations, the notion that an eating disorder may only arise in people who are extremely thin contributes to misdiagnosis or delayed diagnosis, even among individuals seeking help from medical and mental health specialists. Unfortunately, many healthcare professionals lack exposure to and training in eating disorders, emphasizing the critical role of eating disorder specialists in ensuring successful diagnosis and early intervention.

Furthermore, there is the misconception that people are able to tell if someone has an eating disorder by looking at them. People suffering from an eating disorder come in a variety of forms and sizes. The media and other public conversations regarding eating disorders frequently center on a single diagnosis: anorexia, in which sufferers frequently exhibit the symptom of being excessively underweight. Individuals suffering from eating disorders might be of any weight and their weight can fluctuate.

Everyone should follow their intuition when it comes to eating disorders among people they know. In addition to educating themselves about fundamental eating disorder knowledge and distinguishing myth from truth. Eating disorders thrive in the shadows, but people frequently have a gut feeling when something is awry with their friends or family. While many may be afraid of saying the wrong thing but also do not want to remain silent, they are a key advocate for accurate diagnosis and appropriate treatment. If you are concerned, see an eating disorder expert as soon as possible—early intervention is important to long-term eating disorder treatment. Furthermore, it is also helpful to note that disordered eating occurs on a continuum; even if someone doesn't meet criteria for an eating disorder, they may still benefit from evaluation and treatment.

Another widely known myth is that “eating disorders are solely related to food”. While eating disorders are commonly associated with a fixation with calories, weight, or form, these illnesses have biological, psychological, and societal roots. Restriction, bingeing, purging, or over-exercise habits typically indicate a desire to exert control over something important in the individual's life. Because friends and family incorrectly assume that eating disorders are just about food, they frequently advise their loved ones to "just eat more," "just eat less," or "just eat

healthier" in order to be "cured" of this condition. In reality, true recovery from eating disorders frequently necessitates a mix of medical, psychiatric, therapeutic, and nutritional intervention.

#### Tips or Questions to Ask Someone With an ED:

There are 5 key signs that identify a person who may have an eating disorder. These questions may seem direct and blunt. However, it is always better to assess than dismiss. Ask these questions from the MHFA curriculum to help detect if a person in your life is developing or living with an eating disorder.

1. Do you make yourself sick (induce vomiting) because you feel uncomfortably full?
2. Do you worry that you have lost control over how much you eat?
3. Have you recently lost more than 12 pounds in a three-month period?
4. Do you think you are too fat, even though others say you are too thin?
5. Would you say that food dominates your life?

Many people may be unaware of their signs and symptoms. If you are still not sure if your loved one is living with an eating disorder, call the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) helpline at 800-931-2237 for information and support.

#### References:

<https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/statistics-research-eating-disorders>

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/eating-disorders>

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3221424/>

<https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/2020/02/5-questions-to-ask-someone-who-might-have-an-eating-disorder/>

