

Is your child developing an unhealthy relationship with their body and food?

Starvation in a young brain causes severe physical damage and fuels a cycle of depression and rigid thinking that reinforces disordered eating. Early intervention is crucial to prevent long-term mental and physical health problems.

BY TRACEY WADE

Eating disorders are most likely to develop in young people aged between 12 and 25. But parents and other close adults can miss the early warning signs. For example, you might notice your child doing more exercise or choosing healthier foods and see these behaviours as normal or even positive. Eating disorders are serious mental health conditions characterised by a persistent, unhealthy relationship with food, eating and body image. They include anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorder, and all are linked to a higher risk of dying early.

Eating disorders and disordered eating, which means problematic behaviours around food, without a diagnosed disorder, are on the rise among young people.

We know noticing and intervening early are key to stopping them developing.

Here is what to look out for, and what to do if you are worried.

Research has identified some of the most common early warning signs of eating disorders in children. Any one of these is cause for concern.

They exercise too much

This means exercise beyond physical activity guidelines for young people. Your child may want to exercise even when injured, or may retreat to their bedroom to exercise secretly. They may be unable to sit still, jiggling body parts to use up calories.

They keep losing weight

Young people should be increasing in weight as they grow in height, unless medically supervised otherwise. This supports optimal development of major body organs, including the brain. But parents often miss these physical changes, as young people can become very skilled at hiding weight loss by wearing multiple layers or baggy clothes.

They become obsessed with food and food preparation

You might notice your child spending more time talking about food and eating, wanting to know what is in every meal so they can count calories, and seeking reassurance about how much they have eaten.

They cut out major food groups

"Clean" eating and veganism can be popular among young people. But dieting is a strong risk factor for developing an eating disorder. You may notice your child increasingly restricts their diet or is often distressed about what is an "acceptable" food to eat.

They become secretive around food

Does your child always find a reason to avoid eating with other people? Does a lot of food go missing from the pantry? Having dinner as a family is a protective factor, it normalises eating and helps you see what and how your child eats. This can also be why your child wants to avoid it. This is why eating regularly together is often an important component of recovery.

They become worried about body image

Occasional negative comments about appearance are relatively normal in adolescence, and need to be handled with care. But problems can emerge where your child makes frequent and sustained negative remarks about their body weight and/or shape.

They develop rituals and rules around eating

This could look like cutting food into tiny pieces, or having to eat food in a certain order or use the same crockery or cutlery every time. When rituals are disrupted, the child becomes distressed.

What you can do if you are worried

Start a compassionate conversation
Gently express concern, without judgement. You might try:

You have not seemed yourself lately. Is everything OK?

You have lost a lot of weight. I am worried about you.

Acknowledge the challenges and offer unconditional love and support. Anxiety is a major driving force of many eating disorders.

Let your child know you care deeply about them and that you are there to help and act in their best interest.

Be prepared for denial or resistance

Stay calm and be patient.

It might take time for your child to acknowledge the issue. You may need to get them treatment, regardless of how willing they are.

Do not hope it will just go away

Being proactive and intervening early is key and can help avoid physical and mental health issues down the track.



Poor body image leads to unhealthy eating.