The Silent Epidemic of Eating Disorders in the Workplace

Health Links™ is a mentoring program that champions health and safety at work. We offer evidence-based Healthy Workplace Certification™ and advising to help organizations and their team members achieve Total Worker Health™.

As a nonprofit based in the Center for Health, Work & Environment at the Colorado School of Public Health, our deep experience as researchers and industry trailblazers informs everything we do for you.

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The Spectrum of Eating Behavior*

Intuitive Eating
- Recognizes hunger cues
- Eats when hungry
- Stops when satiated or satisfied
- Eating can be seen as pleasurable
- Can eat mindfully and with intention
- Has more positive body image days than not
- Includes a variety of foods
- Allows for indulgences
- Does not regulate emotions through food
- Engages in movement and activities for enjoyment as well as health

Disordered Eating
- Difficulty with reading body’s cues of hunger & fullness
- In and out of diet trends
- Firm dietary restrictions
- Incorporates restriction in their relationship with food
- Eats or restricts to regulate emotions or the environment
- Has more negative body image days than positive ones
- Inflexible with their variety of foods
- Engages in movement to make up for caloric intake

Eating Disorder
- Anorexia Nervosa (AN)
- Bulimia Nervosa (BN)
- Binge Eating Disorder (BED)
- Avoidant and Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID)
- Eating Disorders Not Otherwise Specified (EDNOS)
- Diabulimia
- Orthorexia

*These lists are not extensive and many individuals do not get diagnosed. Behaviors are experienced on a spectrum as well. All individuals struggling with their relationship with food and body deserve support.

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Eating disorders are biopsychosocial.

- **Biological**
  - Genetics
  - Neonatal complications
  - History of dieting

- **Psychological**
  - Perfectionism
  - Emotional dysregulation
  - Body dissatisfaction

- **Social**
  - High-risk vocations
  - Fat phobia
  - Weight stigma
  - Family dynamic
  - Culture

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30 million
At least 30 million people of all ages and genders suffer from an eating disorder in the U.S.

62 minutes
Every 62 minutes, at least one person dies as a direct result of an eating disorder.

#1
Eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any mental illness.

1 in 5
One in five of those suffering from anorexia die by suicide.
The iceberg metaphor
How do eating disorders affect the workplace?
You can’t tell if someone is struggling with an eating disorder by looking at them.

What are the warning signs?

- Extreme emotions, attitudes, and behaviors surrounding weight and food issues
- Preoccupation with weight, food, calories, dieting, and/or body image
- Development of abnormal, secretive, extreme, or ritualized food or eating habits
- Withdrawal from usual friends and activities
- Evidence of binge eating, such as the disappearance of a large amount of food
- Evidence of purging behaviors, including frequent trips to the bathroom after meals, self-induced vomiting, periods of fasting, or laxative, diet pill, or diuretic abuse
- Compulsive or excessive exercising
- Feelings of isolation, depression, anxiety, or irritability

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What is the role of workplace culture?
How can you help your workplace?

- Provide resources to employees (e.g. NEDA brochures, company health plan benefits, list of local providers, etc.)
- Educate yourself on the signs and symptoms of disordered eating
- Share your concerns—respectfully
- Screen and intervene
- Create a supportive workplace culture
  - Develop open communication
  - Avoid conversations about food, diet, and body shape
  - Provide flexibility
  - Offer a quiet place to eat
The double-edged sword of Workplace Wellness Programs

01 Avoid programs that focus on weight or weight loss

02 Programs involving exercise and nutrition should be strictly voluntary

03 Avoid programs that call for competition and weigh-ins

04 If you are concerned about a workplace wellness program’s potentially harmful effects, share your concerns with your HR department

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Messaging

01
Look at the messaging around your workplace (e.g. signs promoting calorie counting)

02
Limit “diet talk”

03
Be sensitive talking about personal diet plans, weight goals, and/or exercise regimen

04
Refrain from commenting on someone’s weight loss/gain or eating behavior

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Questions?
Want to learn more?

**Online**
- National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA)
- The Eating Disorder Foundation
- Project Heal

**Podcasts**
- Food Psych Podcast with Christy Harrison
- Body Kindness with Rebecca Scritchfield
- The Appetite by Opal: Food+Body Wisdom

**Books**
- *Sick Enough* by Jennifer Gaudiani
- *What Causes Eating Disorders — And What Do They Cause?* by Dr. Guido Frank
- *Anti-Diet: Reclaim Your Time, Money, Well-Being, and Happiness Through Intuitive Eating* by Christy Harrison MPH RD
- *Health at Every Size: The Surprising Truth About Your Weight* by Linda Bacon
- *Recover Your Perspective: A Guide to Understanding Your Eating Disorder and Creating Recovery Using CBT, DBT, and ACT* by Dr. Janean Anderson

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