

Creating a Healthy Environment to Reduce the Risk of Eating Disorders

At SAGE, we believe that health is all about balance. However, our society glorifies the opposite of balance—extreme thinness through restriction, exercise, and any other means necessary. Although there’s a strong movement against such practices, many magazine editors, Hollywood directors, media moguls, and clothing designers still equate thinness with health, attractiveness, self-control, moral goodness, and happiness. This false equation leads many children and young adults who are already vulnerable to turn to food as a means of control over their lives. Is it any wonder that eating disorders are on the rise?

These serious but treatable illnesses have physical and psychiatric components with chronic, potentially life-threatening medical consequences that can affect many aspects of life, including school. Healthy students are better learners; conversely, poor nutrition is associated with a host of mental, emotional, and physical barriers to learning—not to mention the academic and athletic performance upon which students and schools are judged when it comes to rankings and college admissions. Ill-nourished students have worse attention spans, spottier memories, lower grades, and less impressive scores on standardized tests. They’re more likely to be tired, inattentive, irritable, uncooperative, and absent. In short, they’re worse off in the classroom, in the hallways, and on the field.

Your students are at risk—all of them. Eating disorders, which are characterized by obsession with food, body image, and weight, usually develop in adolescence. However, all ages, sexes, genders and orientations, races, ethnicities, and nationalities can be affected. In fact, students at private schools are particularly high-risk—not only because of their age, but also because of the high expectations for their academic and athletic performance. When already high-achieving students internalize these expectations, it adds sometimes-unbearable pressure.

An eating disorder in an individual is often indicated by five general factors: behavioral **change** or **rigidity**, **preoccupation** with food or calories, social **isolation**, and an **inability** or unwillingness to acknowledge that something’s wrong. The National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) provides [this list](#) of specific symptoms—but remember, eating disorders *must* be diagnosed and treated by a medical professional. You cannot diagnose—or treat—one yourself. Those who are addicted to drugs or alcohol can avoid the addictive substance, but those with disordered eating habits can’t avoid food. Your student will need a treatment plan and professional support moving forward.

Early intervention can save lives. That’s why it’s important to have a reporting policy ready to go. If you suspect that a student has an eating disorder, we recommend that you discuss it with the school counselor or nurse, who can then make the decision of how best to communicate with the student’s parents and get him or her to a doctor or counselor. The process described above is just one method—your school should establish a clear but discreet process for sharing concerns about changes in a student’s eating patterns or behavior. Consult these resources from [NEDA](#) and the [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#) for best practices and guidance in establishing a clear reporting policy at your institution.

Even if you’re not a doctor, you can reduce the risk of eating disorders in the young people around you. Studies show that adults play a major role in influencing kids’ food preferences, eating habits, portion sizes, nutritional intake, and attitudes about food. In fact, of all the forces that influence adolescent health-risk behavior, the most critical are family and school.

Help your institution create a healthy environment that reduces the risk of eating disorders with the following tips. Think of it as a preemptive strike against eating disorders.

- Help your students form healthy relationships with food by emphasizing variety, balance, and moderation.
 - Offer a variety of ingredients, cuisines, and whole-food options in your dining hall.
 - Give adequate time for meals and encourage sit-down meals. Consider reconfiguring your schedule or allocating funding to renovating your dining hall.
 - Don't identify foods as "bad." Instead, discuss balance and moderation.
 - Don't restrict or require foods. Doing so increases the likelihood that your students will do the exact opposite of what you recommend when you or their parents aren't around.
 - Promote an understanding of food groups or macronutrients (rather than counting calories) to encourage balanced eating behaviors without increasing the risk of eating disorders. Refrain from posting calories—instead, use symbols or colors to indicate relative nutrient density.
- Offer positive nutrition messaging.
 - Say things like, "Eat your colors," "Variety, balance, and moderation, and "Food is fuel."
 - Don't engage in fat talk, food shaming, diet talk, or calorie-counting—even about yourself. Implement policies to discourage bullying, especially weight-based bullying.
 - Don't equate food with positive or negative behavior (e.g., saying you were "good" today because you didn't eat that donut, offering food-based rewards for good grades).
- Take the focus off food.
 - Contextualize food with culture and opportunities for socialization (e.g., holiday traditions, mealtime conversations) so it's not associated solely with health and appearance. Incorporate display cooking, educational events, family-style dining, or other environmental cues that signify that mealtime is about more than food.
 - Carve out time for students to garden and cook with each other, as well as teachers, administrators, and staff members. Highlight the food they've grown in the dining hall and at special events to recognize their work.
- Cultivate emotional strength and self-confidence.
 - Teach "coping and life skills," such as self-esteem, problem solving, decision making, assertiveness, communication, healthy relationships, and stress management. Do this in health classes or advisee groups, by inviting professionals to speak, and in the behavior you model. Also consider modeling it in the literature, word problems, and project-based learning you bring into the classroom.
 - Encourage critical media consumption—challenge media messages that thin people are more deserving of love, fame, or success. Teach academic analytical skills with the understanding that your students will use them not only on texts and in mock trial, but also as they navigate the outside world.
- Educate staff at all levels.
 - Train them to recognize and report potential signs of an eating disorder.
 - Encourage them to examine their own attitudes about body image, and to model the positive behaviors listed above.

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External Sources:

<https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/warning-signs-and-symptoms>
<https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/learn/general-information/risk-factors>
<https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/what-can-you-do-help-prevent-eating-disorders>
<https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/learn/general-information/ten-steps>
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