
EATING DISORDERS IN BOYS AND MEN

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National Eating Disorder Information Centre

www.nedic.ca

EATING DISORDERS AMONG BOYS AND MEN

Boys and men represent approximately 20% of people living with an eating disorder.

Eating disorders are serious mental illnesses characterized by persistent disturbances in eating and eating-related behaviours that result in harm to one's physical health, mental health, and/or psychosocial functioning. These behaviours often serve as ways of coping with distressing life circumstances, interpersonal difficulties, and/or negative emotions.

It is important to know that there is no singular cause of an eating disorder. The development of an eating disorder cannot be attributed to a specific person, event, or gene. Eating disorders are complex illnesses that are best understood as the outcome of the interaction of multiple biological, psychological, and sociocultural factors. Risk factors include genetic vulnerability/family history, body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, perfectionism, predisposition to experiencing negative emotions, dieting, and exposure to weight stigma.

MESSAGES ABOUT BEING A 'REAL MAN'

Boys and men face strong messages from society about what it means to be a 'real man'. The 'ideal man' is often portrayed as someone who is sensitive but strong, a caring family member but career-oriented, economically stable yet risk-taking – and, of course, physically attractive. This 'superman' ideal places great pressure on boys and men to fulfill an unrealistic expectation.

Few body types are seen as desirable for boys and men – generally either large and muscular or slim yet toned. This narrow masculine ideal negatively affects boys and men, as body weight and shape are often perceived as representations of one's character and willpower. As a result, some boys and men turn to harmful practices such as dieting, excessive exercise, and substance use in an attempt to overcome feelings of inadequacy and to better 'fit in'. Since these behaviours may enable an individual to feel in control and accepted by others, they serve a purpose, even if they also create problems, such as isolation.

The misconception that eating disorders almost exclusively affect girls and women creates barriers for boys and men in seeking and accessing help. The shame and need for secrecy frequently felt by those with eating disorders are magnified for boys and men because of the additional shame of having

a 'girl's illness'. Boys and men may also believe that it is not masculine to talk about their feelings and/or that seeking help is a sign of weakness.

WARNING SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF EATING DISORDERS

Physical, behavioural, and emotional warning signs of someone experiencing or at risk of an eating disorder include:

- Excessive concern about one's weight, size, or shape.
- Preoccupation with food and nutrition.
- Depression or irritability.
- Guilt or shame about eating.
- Rigid and ritualistic eating behaviours.
- Progressive elimination of foods from one's diet.
- Feeling fat despite being at a low or "average" weight.
- Exercising through fatigue, illness, or injury.
- Noticeable weight loss or weight fluctuations.
- Evidence of vomiting after eating.
- Inappropriate use of substances, e.g. sports supplements, steroids.

HOW CAN I HELP MYSELF?

If you are experiencing some or all of these symptoms:

- Talk honestly with someone you trust who can help you, e.g. a family member, friend, mentor, or spiritual leader.
- Contact NEDIC for information, support, and referrals.
- See a qualified health practitioner.
- Appreciate your own strength and courage in reaching out for help.
- Be gentle with yourself.
- Recognize that it is possible to fully recover from an eating disorder.

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HOW CAN I HELP SOMEONE ELSE?

- Seek credible information about eating disorders – the more you know, the more you can help.
- Let the individual know you are concerned and willing to provide support.
- Find out where the individual can go for help and encourage them to seek it.
- Provide the individual with information to help them understand the impacts of disordered eating on their social, emotional, and physical well-being.
- Be patient. Overcoming an eating problem can take a long time.
- Avoid focusing on appearance. Instead, talk about concerning behaviours you have observed.
- Understand your limits and take care of yourself. Role-model healthy attitudes and behaviours.
- Address food- and weight-related prejudices in yourself and others.
- If you are a parent of a boy with an eating disorder, you will need to take responsibility for helping him normalize his eating behaviours, ensuring his nutrition intake is adequate, and, if necessary, limiting exercise.
- If the individual is a child or youth, tell his parent or caregiver about your concerns.

For information, support and resources, contact NEDIC.

Articles on eating disorders in boys and men can be found at www.nedic.ca.

National Eating Disorder Information Centre

200 Elizabeth St., ES 7-421 Toronto, ON M5G 2C4 Canada

Tel: 416-340-4156

Fax: 416-340-4736

Toll-free: 1-866-NEDIC-20

Email: nedic@uhn.ca

Web: www.nedic.ca

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