



A GUIDE FOR PARENTS & YOUTH

# DISORDERED EATING

### What is Disordered Eating?

Disordered eating describes a set of behaviours, thoughts, and emotions around food and body image. While disordered eating doesn't fit the standard definitions of eating disorders, like anorexia or bulimia, it isn't typical of healthy eating habits, either.



ALMOST 10% OF THE POPULATION IS THOUGHT TO BE LIVING WITH AN EATING DISORDER.

### Forms of Disordered Eating may include:

- **Fasting** (not eating for long periods)
- **Restrictive dieting** (severely limiting how much you eat)
- **Purging** (through vomiting or abusing laxatives)
- **Over-exercising**
- **Abusing steroid drugs**
- **“Yo-Yo” dieting** (repeated cycles of extreme dieting, followed by weight gain)

Young people may have symptoms of disordered eating only once in a while. Sometimes these symptoms are triggered by stressful events in a young person's life. He or she may use disordered eating to cope with strong feelings.

If these behaviours continue for long periods of time, they may start to interfere with everyday life. They can lead to developing an eating disorder like anorexia or bulimia.

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Both men and women struggle with eating disorders. For men and boys, social anxiety and pressure to achieve the ideal muscular physique can contribute to disordered eating. Women and girls are overwhelmed with media and social norms that define thinness as “attractive.”

**98% OF WOMEN & GIRLS SAY THEY ARE UNHAPPY WITH THEIR BODIES.**

Young people get messages from society that being “fat” is bad and unacceptable. Being thin is “perfect” and “in control.” When these messages go unchallenged by parents and teachers, they can lead children and teens to develop an unhealthy body image. Disordered eating becomes a way to maintain an unrealistic standard.

As well, if someone is living with depression or anxiety, or recovering from trauma, they can be at risk of disordered eating. It’s important to consider the “big picture” of a young person’s life and emotional health when the young person shows signs of disordered eating.

## What can I do?

- 1 Find a compassionate, consistent parenting style that lets you set firm boundaries and realistic consequences.** It’s important to create a home environment that encourages freedom to be who you are and avoids anxiety about potential problems and perfectionistic behaviour — this can lead to disordered eating.
- 2 Model the way you expect your children to act.** Eat a variety of foods you enjoy. Exercise for fun, not just to burn calories. Show them how doing things that make you feel good, like listening to music or seeing friends, can help them cope with sadness or anger.
- 3 Maintain a family atmosphere where open, honest communication is valued, and children are allowed to express their own opinions.** A difficulty processing “negative” emotions like sadness and anger can lead to self-denying food as a way to “keep control.”
- 4 Be someone your child can trust with sharing their feelings.** Show them that you value them as they are, regardless of how they look, what kind of marks they get, or how good an athlete they are.
- 5 Show your children a balanced approach to eating and food.** Sit down to regular family meals. Don’t use food to bribe, reward, or punish children.
- 6 Teach your children how to think critically.** Give them room to disagree and challenge conventional wisdom. This helps them resist the lure of media messages and peer pressure. Model how to think, not what to think.
- 7 Let your children know you value inner beauty over outer beauty.** Don’t make comments about people’s looks and weight.
- 8 Seek professional guidance.** If your child is showing signs of disordered eating, it is important to get help before disordered eating becomes an eating disorder. Talk to a counsellor and be sure your child has regular visits to the doctor and dentist.

For more info  
[jessieslegacy.com](http://jessieslegacy.com)  
[heretohelp.ca](http://heretohelp.ca)

Jessie’s Legacy is proud to be affiliated with HeretoHelp. HeretoHelp is a project of the BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information, a group of non-profit agencies providing good-quality information to help individuals and families maintain or improve their mental well-being. The BC Partners are funded by BC Mental Health and Substance Use Services, an agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority.

 **Family Services North Shore**  
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