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Signs of eating disorder

TEENS & TWEENS BY CHARIS PATRICK



Spot the signs and help youngsters afflicted with eating disorders find help.

FOLLOWING my column a fortnight ago in which I highlighted that anorexia nervosa and bulimia usually develop during the teenage years, I thought it will be helpful to compile a list of dos and don'ts and the warning signs related to eating disorders.

Although only a medical practitioner can diagnose an eating disorder, it is good if we can be aware of its warning signs in a person so that we can do the right thing should the need arise.

Warning signs

1. Sudden, abnormal weight loss or gain.
2. Diets all the time, feels "too fat" even when thin.

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3. Exercises excessively or compulsively.
4. Obsessed with weight; terrified of gaining weight.
5. Always counts calories and food grammes; always studies labels on food packages; refuses to eat foods with fat in them; drinks diet sodas all the time.
6. Abuses laxatives, diuretics, diet pills, supplements and "natural" diet aids.
7. Often makes excuses not to eat ("I just ate," "I'm not hungry," "I'm not wired to eat," "My stomach is too upset right now," "I'll eat something later").
8. Leaves the table during meals; spends time in the bathroom right after eating; runs the water to mask any sounds; vomits after eating.
9. Acts weird around food: eats only certain types of food; chews food, then spits it out before swallowing; skips meals; acts "disgusted" with food; eats only "safe" foods from a certain plate or bowl; cuts food into tiny pieces; chews every bite the same number of times; keeps moving food around the plate.
10. Refuses to eat around other people; avoids restaurants.
11. Eats in secret; gorges on food when alone; hides food; has a lot of empty food packages and wrappers.
12. Moody, irritable, secretive, sad, cranky, touchy and/or tired all the time; has dramatic mood swings.
13. Starts wearing loose-fitting or baggy clothing, or very tight-fitting or revealing clothing.
14. Uses lots of negative self-talk ("I'm a loser", "Everyone hates me"); has poor self-esteem.
15. Jealous of people who are thin and vows to be like them. Claims that being thin will change his or her life ("I'll feel better about myself when I'm thin" or "People will like me when I'm thin").
16. Obsesses about his or her body; hates it or parts of it; spends a lot of time in front of the mirror, or refuses to look in a mirror.
17. Lies about eating; feels ashamed or guilty after eating.
18. Cuts himself/herself or hurts self in other ways.
19. Has physical signs of a problem – like dull, stringy hair (or loss of hair, tooth decay, very dry skin, rashes, cold hands, scrapes on the backs of his or her knuckles (from self-induced vomiting).
20. Denies that anything is wrong.

Do's

1. Learn as much as you can about eating disorders; for a start, somethingfishy.org is a great site.
2. Be compassionate. That way, you're less likely to be judgmental.
3. Encourage them to get help. Suggest that he or she tell a parent, see a doctor, or talk to an adult he or she can trust. Tell someone if they won't. Keep telling until someone promises to help.
4. Stick with them during the recovery process. Be there and be encouraging, even when they seem frustrated or want to give up.
5. Be realistic. Know your limits. You can't force them to change his or her behaviour, or even to get help. What you can do is to be aware, be there, be supportive and make sure that at least one trusted adult knows the situation.

Don'ts

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1. Confront them in a group, lecture them or blame them. (Do use "I-language", not "You-language". For example: "I notice you haven't been eating lunch lately", not "You're getting too skinny").
2. Promise not to tell anyone else. Threaten to end your relationship or leave them if they won't change their behaviour or get help.
3. Associate food or weight with how they look. (Avoid saying things like, "Honestly, you'd look better if you put on some weight"; they will take it as "I look awful!" or "I really WAS fat!")
4. Turn into food police. Constantly ask them if they are eating more (or less). Try to convince him or her to eat differently. Get into power struggles over their eating.
5. Show surprise if they deny having a problem, or tell you to mind your own business, or try to pick a fight with you. Give up on them or get discouraged. (You just have to be patient. Recovering from an eating disorder takes time and a lot of effort.)

Eating disorder is a disease of self-esteem. It is emotional pain camouflaged through food (or lack of it). It is important to remember that we are there to be supportive. However, we do not replace the professional help of a doctor or therapist. The key is to help them find help.

Charis Patrick is a trainer and family life educator who is married with four children. Email her at star2@thestar.com.my.

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