National Eating Disorder Information Centre

BULLETIN

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Addressing Food and Eating Disorders in the Workplace

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Given that the average person spends around 92,000 hours of their life working, it is important that we understand how our relationships with food and our bodies impact our colleagues and our functioning at work. While many people struggle somewhat with how they feel about food or their body, others may develop eating disorders, which are severe mental health concerns with the potential to significantly affect workplace performance. This article will explore what eating disorders are, how they may present in the workplace, and how workplaces may trigger eating-related concerns, and will offer tips for supporting those suffering from these concerns. Ultimately, the hope is that this article will help people create a safe space at work for preventing and addressing eating-related concerns.

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WHAT ARE EATING DISORDERS?

While people may miss meals, eat to soothe their feelings, or have an unhealthy relationship with food or body at times, these alone are not considered eating disorders. Eating disorders are serious mental health concerns, which cause significant interference in the lives of those affected. There are a number of different eating disorders, including but not limited to: Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia Nervosa, Binge Eating Disorder, Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder, and Pica. Here are the symptoms of three of the most frequently seen eating disorders, according to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition* (DSM-5):

- **Anorexia Nervosa** is characterized by a restriction of energy intake (food) leading to a significantly low body weight; an intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat; disturbance in the way one's body weight or shape is experienced; undue influence of body weight or shape on self-evaluation, or lack of recognition of the seriousness of their low body weight.
- **Bulimia Nervosa** involves recurrent episodes of binge eating (intake of a large amount of food in a relatively short amount of time in a way that feels out of control); recurrent compensatory behaviour in order to prevent weight gain (purging); self-evaluation unduly influenced by body shape and weight.
- **Binge Eating Disorder** involves recurrent episodes of binge eating; however, unlike individuals with Bulimia Nervosa, those with Binge Eating Disorder do not routinely engage in compensatory behaviours.

All eating disorders can have serious psychological and physical health complications, with the potential for long term medical problems. They can impact all body systems and lead to outcomes including decline in cognitive functioning, low blood pressure, anemia, osteoporosis, and many more. In fact, eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any mental health concern and studies suggest that 10% of those with Anorexia Nervosa will die within the first 10 years of their illness (Sullivan, 2002). While effective treatments exist, early detection and intervention are key.

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EATING DISORDER DEVELOPMENT

Sociocultural pressures to be thin or muscular are understood to be among the factors that contribute to the development of an eating disorder. These pressures may come from social media, friends, and family. However, they may also occur within the workplace environment, with certain careers (such as professional athletics, modelling, and acting) carrying a higher risk of developing an eating disorder given their emphasis on relating physical appearance to job performance. Even outside of these careers, some workplaces may inadvertently place excessive attention on physical appearance, potentially leading to an increase in body dissatisfaction and/or contributing to the development of an eating disorder. While it will be challenging to modify our entire society's focus on physical appearance within any one type of workplace, we can start being aware of how we discuss diets or exercise regimens to move toward safer work environments for everyone and to support those who have an eating disorder.

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WHY DO WE EAT?

Let us spend a moment thinking about our relationship with food, beyond eating disorders, and how we can make workplaces safe spaces for ourselves and others. As many of us can attest to, food is more than fuel for our bodies, although we certainly cannot deny that food provides energy, allows for growth and regeneration, and regulates chemical processes within our bodies. Fueling our bodies effectively improves our cognitive capacity, thus increasing our functioning at work, and work productivity decreases if we miss lunch or rush out of the house without eating breakfast. In fact, according to the World Health Organization (2003), adequate nourishment could raise national productivity levels by 20%. Stated differently, our nutrition habits directly impact our workplace productivity.

Beyond the physiological reasons we eat, food can provide us with social and psychological benefits. At work, we often connect with each other over the lunch table which increases our sense of belonging and social relationships with our colleagues. While this is often an excellent space in which to connect with others, we should also consider how food, bodies, and exercise are discussed at work. Some of these discussions can be challenging for someone sensitive to these topics or at a higher likelihood of developing an eating disorder.

HELPING TO FOSTER POSITIVE WORKPLACES AROUND FOOD AND BODY

While it is possible that there is no one at your workplace with an eating disorder, everyone should be encouraged to create and foster a positive workplace culture around food and body. Spend a moment now to think about what you and others need in a workplace. Do people discuss food, dieting, body image or exercise around the lunch table or proverbial "water cooler"? What do those discussions sound like? Where do people eat at work? Do people take lunch breaks? What about weight loss competitions – are they encouraged? It is important to be aware of what we say around others as our words may negatively impact someone suffering from an eating disorder or at risk of developing one. Here are some suggestions to improve your workplace culture around food and dieting:

- Create a culture around eating lunch together and not alone at one's desk.
- Offer comfortable and inviting options for where to eat lunch (such as a lunch room).
- Ensure people have time to eat lunch and snacks.
- Focus on conversation topics such as hobbies, upcoming trips, children – anything of interest away from dieting, weight loss, and body image.
- Avoid workplace wellness programs that promote weight loss or competition (note that programs that promote mental and physical health can be helpful, however participation should be voluntary and should not focus on weight).

> While figuring out how to support someone struggling with an eating disorder can be confusing, scary, and unclear, one of the first steps is being aware of warning signs that an eating disorder may be present.

HOW TO SUPPORT SOMEONE WITH AN EATING DISORDER

Many people report feeling stigmatized at work because of their eating disorder and do not know if their employers and colleagues are appropriately informed (Beat, 2016). While figuring out how to support someone struggling with an eating disorder can be confusing, scary, and unclear, one of the first steps is being aware of warning signs that an eating disorder may be present. You cannot tell if someone is suffering from an eating disorder just based upon their appearance. It is important to be aware of behavioural signs. Examples of warnings signs that may someone with an eating disorder may exhibit are:

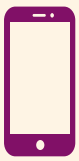
- Indicators that they are preoccupied with weight loss, dieting, or food (e.g., frequent dieting-focused discussion at work).
- Evidence of binge eating (e.g., wrappers hidden in office, food missing in shared kitchen).
- Evidence of purging behaviours (e.g., often going to the bathroom after meals).
- Excessive exercise regime (e.g., exercising beyond what is considered normative, missing out on other important aspects of their lives in order to exercise).
- Withdrawal from friends and usual activities (e.g., missing shared meals, being absent from the kitchen during lunch breaks, avoiding social gatherings).

As a colleague or manager, you may have opportunities to notice a problem in someone at work. If you are worried, it is important to have the courage to talk to them. If you suspect your colleague has an eating disorder:

- Start by educating yourself about eating disorders.
- Speak to your human resources department about any supports they may be able to provide you.
- Approach your colleague from a point of compassion and non-judgment.
- Pick an appropriate time to speak with them, when are likely to be most open to a conversation about a sensitive topic (i.e., not right after a tough meeting).
- Explain what is causing you to be concerned and assure them you are not blaming or shaming, but coming from a position of caring. Avoid making comments about their body and focus instead on behaviours you have noticed. Keep in mind that people with eating disorders may lack insight into their illness or be ambivalent to making changes. Explore their reasons for, and fears around, making changes.
- Encourage them to seek help. A good first step for them would be to talk to their primary care provider, who often have a list of resources in your local area. You might also suggest they look into the National Eating Disorder Information Centre (www.nedic.ca) which is a wealth of information.

As an employer, be flexible to support employees experiencing an eating disorder. Modifications in the work environment and schedule can facilitate recovery. Employers can offer several options to encourage recovery including time off and flexible schedules for medical and psychological appointments, more frequent breaks to allow for regular eating, and the ability to call treatment professionals during work hours. People with eating disorders might also require leaves of absence from work in order to participate in intensive treatment, such as in a day hospital or residential program; limited/routine work schedules, such as more predictable shifts or fewer hours; or modified job duties depending on their physical condition (e.g., ability to sit while eating, less strenuous tasks). From a workplace perspective, it is beneficial to support employees experiencing an eating disorder by providing time off to attend treatment programs and accommodations to gradually return to work as this support is vital to their recovery and their ability to contribute in the workplace to their full potential. This is also pivotal for an employee who is supporting a family member who is struggling with an eating disorder, as family members are key members of an eating disorder treatment team.

Take some time today to explore how you can make your workplace a safer space.



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