

Recognizing and Responding to Eating Disorders

Eating disorders are life-threatening illnesses that affect physical, mental, and reproductive health. Early detection and response can help clients toward full recovery.



Signs and symptoms¹

- **Emotional:** preoccupation with weight, dieting, body changes, food, or eating; mood swings, social withdrawal, anxiety, or suicidality
- **Physical:** weight fluctuations or lack of weight gain, dry skin and hair, brittle nails, fine hair on body, yellow skin, cold mottled hands and feet, feet swelling, cuts/calluses across tops of fingers, poor wound healing, abnormal laboratory findings (anemia, low thyroid and hormone levels, low potassium, low white and red blood cell counts)
- **Client may report:** stomach cramps or other non-specific gastrointestinal complaints, menstrual irregularities, difficulty concentrating, dizziness, fainting, feeling cold all the time, sleep problems, muscle weakness

- * **People with eating disorders can look healthy, but be very ill**
- * **Clients with higher body weight are twice as likely to have an eating disorder, yet are often overlooked**

¹This list is not exhaustive. Warning signs vary across eating disorders and individuals.





Conversation starters

- **Normalize the topic:**

“It’s common to have concerns about our bodies changing. Have you found yourself worrying about food or body image?”

- **Let your client lead the conversation:**

“I notice you seem focused on food and dieting. Would you be open to talking about this?”

- **Be aware of fears that birth control can cause weight gain:**

“You may have heard different things about how birth control can impact a person’s weight. What would you like to know?”

- **Remember that eating disorders are not all about food and body image:**

“A lot of people tell me that when life feels out of control, focusing on food or routines feels like something they can manage. Do you ever feel this way?”

- **Validate your client’s concerns:**

“My hope is that all my clients have a peaceful relationship with food and their bodies, but it’s not always that easy. Some people feel pressure to change their bodies. Is that something on your mind?”

Or simply, “That sounds really tough. You’re not alone.”

Take action

- Screen using validated tools: [SBIRT for Eating Disorders](#)
- Share information with your client: [The NEDA Helpline](#)
- Make warm referrals, both for eating disorder diagnosis and treatment, and for co-occurring conditions
- Learn more at [RHNTC.org](#)

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