

# Reporting tips

Words and pictures matter and there are some terms, phrases and images that can inadvertently make things much worse for someone affected by an eating disorder.

Although you can't 'catch' an eating disorder or develop one just by copying what another person does – if you already have an eating disorder, being influenced by the disordered behaviour of others can be particularly dangerous.

Competitiveness, perfectionism, control and low self esteem form some of the key personality traits that raise the risk for eating disorders. People with eating disorders judge themselves very harshly and are constantly comparing themselves negatively with others. They typically feel they are not ill enough to deserve treatment and help – even when they are very seriously ill indeed. Their dangerously distorted body image can convince them they are grossly overweight when in reality they are emaciated. This distortion only affects their perception of their own body – they are able to accurately judge when others are underweight or ill.

People with eating disorders speak about being 'triggered' – how their eating disorder behaviour and negative mental state can be stimulated, encouraged or reinforced by certain words, images or situations.

Treatment and therapy can help people to identify, recognise and manage these triggers, but they remain a high risk to the individual.

Everyone is different, but there are some common features of the media reporting of eating disorders that a majority of people affected would find triggering.

## Specific weights

Any mention of the lowest weight a person was at is unhelpful. The competitive nature of eating disordered thinking would mean such a number would become a target to aim for. The self critical aspect would make someone judge themselves harshly if they didn't get that 'low' – they can't have been really ill, or not a 'proper' anorexic if their own weight was higher than that reported in the media.

## Amounts eaten

Similarly, mention of specifically small amounts eaten e.g. 'lived on half an apple a day' would act as an encouragement to restrict or purge.

# Reporting tips (cont.)

## Images

Images, especially photographs of certain emaciated body parts are triggering – ribcages, concave stomachs, collar bones, sternums and spines. Tops of arms that are shown as the same circumference as wrists, or thighs the size of knees are also unhelpful.

Parents have frequently told us of their distress at finding a cache or hoard of press or magazine articles about eating disorders that their child was using for inspiration or encouragement.

## General points to consider

More general points to consider avoiding are inaccuracies such as referring to an eating disorder as the 'slimmer's disease' as a phase, fad, or some celebrity copycat. Calling someone an anorexia or bulimia victim is not helpful, neither is adding 'orexia' as a suffix to create a trivial association.

Examples are 'brideorexia' for women dieting to fit a particular wedding dress or 'tanorexia' for someone constantly using sunbeds because they believe they look thinner with a tanned skin.

Referring to someone as 'flirting with an eating disorder' or having a 'touch of anorexia' is unhelpful as it can trivialise the condition.



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