

## **RECOGNIZING AN EATING DISORDER**

An eating disorder often seems to go unnoticed for long periods of time. By the time friends, family or professionals recognize the signs, an individual may have journeyed from disordered eating to a full-blown eating disorder. The challenge is due to the following:

- There are a wide range of healthy body types (many people are underweight and do not have a problem).
- There are a wide range of eating habits.
- The current beauty ideal in Western society is significantly underweight, which makes it more difficult for people to recognize unhealthy states.
- Adolescence is often a period of uneven growth during which weight does not keep up with height.
- Weight loss or gain happens gradually so therefore may go unnoticed by people who see the individual on a daily basis.
- There is a tendency to applaud weight loss rather than express concern about it.
- Many individuals with an eating disorder tend to wear layered, baggy clothing that hides their weight and shape.
- People with bulimia generally fall within a healthy weight range. Their illness can therefore go undetected by others for years.
- Some medical issues may present some of the same symptoms as an eating disorder.
- Some may cloak their disordered eating in vegetarianism, veganism or allergies.
- Most individuals keep their disordered eating behaviours to themselves.

The following warning signs do not represent formal diagnosis. They are red flags that indicate that an individual may need more help.

RECOGNIZING AN EATING DISORDER –

## **Warning Signs that may Indicate Disordered Eating**

### **Changes in regular eating habits**

- Portion sizes have become increasingly smaller or larger.
- Avoids certain foods or entire categories of foods (i.e., carbohydrates).
- Excessive intake of low-fat or “healthy” foods (diet drinks, protein shakes, energy bars).
- Constantly goes on diets and/or makes excuses for not eating.
- Diet contains an excessive amount of gum, coffee and/or diet soft drinks.
- Evidence of food wrappers or packaging hidden around the house or in the garbage.
- Food constantly missing from the kitchen.
- Frequent and/or long visits to the bathroom, especially after eating.
- Obsesses over what others eat and wants to cook for, bake for and feed others.

### **Rituals with food or exercise**

- Cuts food into precise pieces.
- Eats extremely slowly or pushes food around on plate to create the illusion of eating.
- Counts calories obsessively and constantly reads nutrition labels.
- Exercises excessively in spite of injury, illness or poor weather.
- Reads fitness and health magazines and books.

### **Withdrawal**

- Avoids eating meals with others.
- Avoids social situations, especially if they involve food.
- Has withdrawn from friends and regular activities in order to spend more time with the eating disorder.

### **Physical changes**

- Is losing or gaining weight and is defensive about it.
- Has had bloodshot eyes and burst blood vessels (from vomiting).
- Complains of feeling cold all the time, purplish fingers and toes.
- Evidence of hair loss.
- Increased cavities and/or discoloration of the teeth.
- Face and neck glands become swollen and puffy.
- Has scars on the back of hand (from teeth due to forced vomiting).
- Seems tired and lacks vitality.

### **Body Checking**

- Obsessively weighs self and spends excessive amounts of time in front of a mirror.
- Claims to feel fat when obviously not overweight.

### **Other signs**

- Wears baggy clothing and/or layers of clothing.
- Evidence of vomiting (sounds, smells), although has said nothing about being ill.
- Frequent tooth-brushing (to rid mouth of taste and smell of vomit).