

How Parents Can Help a Child with an Eating Disorder

Eating disorders, unhealthy dieting behaviors, and excessive concerns about body size and shape can affect children of all ages. While eating disorders most often develop between ages 14-19, children as young as 6 report wanting to be thinner and actually fear being “fat.” By age 9, many children report feeling “better about themselves” when they are dieting, and by adolescence over half of all girls and one third of all boys admit to using unhealthy behaviors to control their weight. As these statistics demonstrate, eating disorders are an epidemic in the United States, affecting over 10 million people at any given time. Most notably, anorexia nervosa has a mortality rate twelve times higher than all other mental illness, and 1 in 10 people with an eating disorder will lose their life to this deadly disease.

Fortunately, there is hope! As a parent you play a key role in shaping your child’s life. While you may not be able to protect your child from the heartbreaking struggle of an eating disorder, you can be proactive in getting the support and treatment s/he needs. If you suspect that your child is struggling with an eating disorder, trust your intuition and take the necessary steps to protect your child:

- **Seek Help:** Eating disorders are not a trend or a phase, they are not just about wanting to be thin, and they are not a frivolous cry for attention. They are serious, complex diseases that will not go away on their own. It is essential to seek the help of an expert treatment team who specialize in working with individuals affected by eating disorders; this team may include a therapist, registered dietitian, pediatrician, and a psychiatrist.
- **Seek Information:** One of the best ways to understand what your child may be going through is to educate yourself about the complex nature of eating disorders. Knowledge is power! As a loving parent, your initial instinct may be to “fix” whatever is troubling your child; however, in the case of an eating disorder, it is important to understand your child’s disease and learn how you can be supportive throughout his/her recovery process. Read books, visit websites, and connect with other parents who may be going through a similar experience.
- **Seek Support:** Eating disorders affect millions of families, thus you are not alone in this. It is imperative that you seek support for yourself while your child is undergoing his or her treatment. Many parents find themselves feeling angry, scared, sad, guilty, and lonely, and it’s important that you have a place to process these emotions. Furthermore, your child’s recovery will likely involve family therapy, in which certain familial dynamics and experiences may need to be addressed and resolved before your child can fully heal. Seeking individual therapy for yourself, couple therapy for you and your partner, family therapy, and/or support groups is a great way to ensure that your emotional needs are met in a healthy way while your child focuses on his/her own recovery.

The treatment specialists at A New Beginning are here to support you in your efforts to detect and address an eating disorder in your child. Our team of highly skilled clinicians are happy to answer any questions you may have about these deadly diseases, and to provide additional resources that may assist you in helping your child. Furthermore, our expert mental health professionals are ready to serve you and your family with compassion, skill, and commitment. We welcome the opportunity to consult with prospective clients who may be interested in pursuing treatment, and together we will create an individualized treatment plan that will set them on the path of recovery.

At A New Beginning, we wholeheartedly believe that full recovery is possible!