

Eating Disorders and Teens

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW



✓ Recognize the signs.

✓ Know what to do next.

✓ Move forward with Hope.

HOH
HOUSE of HOPE

A House of Hope Guide for Parents of Teens

Is this normal—or is this something more?

It used to be billboards and television ads.

Now it's Instagram, TikTok, YouTube—and endless “wellness” content filled with filtered bodies and quiet messages about what it means to be acceptable.

For today's teens, both boys and girls, the pressure to look a certain way is constant. And when that pressure meets stress, anxiety, or a need for control, it can begin to show up in unhealthy relationships with food.

If you've noticed changes in your teen's eating, body image, or mood, you may be wondering:

Is this normal—or is this something more?

That question can feel heavy. You want to help, but you don't want to overreact or push your teen away.

That's why House of Hope created this guide for parents—to come alongside you with clarity, compassion, and faith-centered support, so you can recognize warning signs, understand next steps, and move forward with confidence and hope.

Important note: *House of Hope is not a medical provider. This guide is for education and support—not diagnosis or treatment. If you suspect an eating disorder, please reach out to a qualified professional promptly.¹*

What is an eating disorder?

According to the Mayo Clinic, eating disorders are serious conditions connected to ongoing eating behaviors that can harm your body, your emotions, and your ability to function day to day.¹

Eating disorders are also considered mental health conditions, not just “food issues.”³

Common eating disorders include:

ANOREXIA NERVOSA

BULIMIA NERVOSA

BINGE-EATING DISORDER

ARFID (AVOIDANT/RESTRICTIVE FOOD INTAKE DISORDER)

One important reminder:

A TEEN CAN STRUGGLE WITH AN EATING DISORDER AT ANY BODY SIZE. YOU CAN'T ALWAYS TELL BY LOOKING.⁴

HOW COMMON ARE EATING DISORDERS IN TEENS?

In one large U.S. study (NCSA), the lifetime prevalence of eating disorders among adolescents ages 13–18 was 2.7% (higher in girls than boys).³

And many more teens experience disordered eating behaviors that can grow into something more serious.

What are the signs my teen might have an eating disorder?

Teens often hide eating disorder behaviors. That's why it helps to watch for patterns.

Common warning signs:

BEING OVERLY CRITICAL OF APPEARANCE OR WEIGHT

FEAR OF WEIGHT GAIN

SKIPPING MEALS OR MAKING EXCUSES NOT TO EAT

CONSTANT MIRROR CHECKING OR BODY CHECKING

FREQUENT BATHROOM TRIPS DURING/AFTER MEALS

EATING UNUSUALLY LARGE AMOUNTS OF FOOD (ESPECIALLY IN SECRET)

DIZZINESS, FAINTING, TROUBLE SLEEPING

STOMACH PAIN, TOOTH SENSITIVITY

NOTICEABLE CHANGES IN WEIGHT OR ENERGY/MOOD

**NOTE: THIS ISN'T A COMPLETE LIST.
IF YOU'RE WORRIED, TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS AND SEEK
PROFESSIONAL GUIDANCE.**

What causes an eating disorder?

Many parents ask, “Why would my teen do this?”

Eating disorders usually come from more than one factor, including:

1. STRESS & EMOTIONAL OVERLOAD

Stress affects appetite differently for every child. Some eat more to self-soothe. Others lose their appetite entirely. Over time, these patterns can spiral into bingeing, purging, or restriction—especially when stress is constant and unprocessed.

Parent takeaway: *Stress doesn't always look like panic. Sometimes it looks like food control.*

2. TRAUMA & LOSS OF SAFETY

Trauma—especially around safety, boundaries, or the body—can deeply affect a child’s relationship with food. For some, eating more feels protective. For others, eating less feels like control. Both are attempts to regain safety in a world that feels unpredictable.

Parent takeaway: *Food behaviors can be a survival response, not a choice.*

3. ANXIETY, DEPRESSION & NUMBING

Anxiety and depression often fuel disordered eating. Food can become a way to manage intense emotions—or to feel something when everything feels flat. Because food is socially acceptable, these patterns often go unnoticed longer than other addictions.

Parent takeaway: *If food is regulating emotions, it deserves attention—not dismissal.*

4. LOSS OF CONTROL & INSTABILITY

When routines, expectations, or family dynamics suddenly change, children may cling to food behaviors as a way to regain control. Eating “just in case” or restricting intake can develop when stability feels threatened.

Parent takeaway: *Control around food often reflects a loss of control elsewhere.*

5. BULLYING, TEASING & WORDS THAT WOUND

Words matter. Repeated comments about weight, appearance, or body shape—whether cruel or casual—can reshape how a child sees themselves. Ignoring harmful words doesn’t heal them; helping kids process and counter them does.

Parent takeaway: *Emotional wounds can be just as damaging as physical ones.*

6. CULTURAL & PEER PRESSURE

Body standards constantly change—and kids feel that pressure deeply. Social media amplifies extremes, making comparison unavoidable. When worth feels tied to appearance, food becomes a tool to measure “success” or “failure.”

Parent takeaway: *The standard will always move. Self-worth must be anchored elsewhere.*

7. PERFECTIONISM & SELF-WORTH

Many children believe they must control their body to be “enough.” When perfection feels required, food becomes a way to earn approval or avoid disappointment. True healing includes learning self-acceptance—even while growth is desired.

Parent takeaway: *Growth and self-compassion must coexist.*

8. FAMILY PATTERNS & MODELING

Children absorb how adults talk about food, bodies, stress, and control. Even unintentional patterns—scarcity, dieting language, or emotional eating—can shape a child’s relationship with food.

Parent takeaway: *Awareness is the first step toward change.*

A note about sports.

Athletes can face extra pressure around performance, weight, or appearance—especially in aesthetic or weightclass sports. Eating disorder risk can be higher in athletes than nonathletes.⁵

IF YOUR TEEN IS IN SPORTS, DON'T PANIC.

**THIS IS SIMPLY A REASON TO KEEP THE CONVERSATION
OPEN AND SUPPORTIVE.**

How social media can make it worse (without you even realizing)

Social media doesn't always say "eating disorder." Often it says:

"Clean eating"

"Discipline"

"Glow up"

"Fitness"

"What I eat in a day"

Some content glamorizes unhealthy habits or turns restriction into a badge of honor.

Gentle warning:

THERE ARE ALSO ONLINE COMMUNITIES THAT ENCOURAGE HARMFUL BEHAVIORS AND SECRECY.

IF YOU GO LOOKING FOR INFORMATION, DO IT CAREFULLY AND IN RECOVERY FOCUSED SPACES.

Parents Share Their Stories



"I had no idea how the diet culture in our house impacted how my 17 year old son I was looking at his own body. He had to go on his first "diet" in elementary school to make weight for his Pop Warner Football team.

Instead of shifting to a different sport or playing flag football instead, we cut bread and pasta and rice to help him lose a few pounds to make weight. As a teenager, he would go into long periods of I'm not eating carbs, or eat potatoes because they were "lowest in carbs."



"A child I spoke with was impacted by language about this being food in the house belonging to one person, or one person in the household needed more nutrients than another.

She took that as that her nutritional needs were not as important as her parents and it gave her an excuse in her head to spiral into anorexia."



One mom shared that no matter how unhappy she is with her body, she had a daughter that looks just like her, body type and all.

If the mom were to speak negatively about the way she looks, it's speaking negatively about the way her daughter looks. Inadvertently teaching her to hate her own body.



"As a boy mom, I didn't think that my negative talk about my self-image would impact my 9 year old son. In my head our bodies had nothing in common. Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus type of thinking.

However, when I noticed him sucking his stomach in on the beach and in pictures and then talking about whether or not his abs were coming in, I started to realize I was teaching the same negative thought patterns to my son."

Why treatment is so important?

Eating disorders can affect the heart, digestive system, teeth, bones, and more. They're also linked with depression, anxiety, selfharm, and suicidal thoughts.¹

Anorexia, in particular, is associated with a very high mortality risk among mental illnesses.⁷

PLEASE DON'T TRY TO HANDLE THIS ALONE.

SUPPORT + TREATMENT CAN BE LIFESAVING.

What can I do if I suspect my child has an eating disorder?

Step 1: Notice patterns (not just one meal)

Write down what you're seeing for a week or two:

EATING CHANGES

MOOD CHANGES

EXERCISE CHANGES

SOCIAL WITHDRAWAL

INCREASED BODY TALK OR FEAR AROUND FOOD

This helps you speak from facts—not fear.

Step 2: Start with connection, not correction

Choose a calm moment—not at the dinner table.

Try something like:

"I'VE NOTICED SOME CHANGES, AND I'M WORRIED BECAUSE I LOVE YOU."

"YOU'RE NOT IN TROUBLE. I'M ON YOUR TEAM."

"HELP ME UNDERSTAND WHAT THIS HAS BEEN LIKE FOR YOU."

Avoid:

COMMENTS ABOUT WEIGHT (“YOU LOOK FINE / TOO THIN / HEALTHIER”)

POWER STRUGGLES AT MEALS

SHAMING OR LECTURING

When a teen feels cornered, they often shut down. When they feel safe, they’re more likely to open up.

Step 3: Get professional help quickly

Eating disorders require specialized care. A strong care team may include:

A PEDIATRICIAN OR PRIMARY CARE DOCTOR

A THERAPIST EXPERIENCED WITH EATING DISORDERS

A DIETITIAN EXPERIENCED WITH EATING DISORDERS

A HIGHER LEVEL OF CARE IF NEEDED

If your teen resists help, don’t give up. Many parents need support too—and that is wise, not weak.

What Scripture says (and what it does not say)

Let's be clear:

Eating disorders are not a moral failure.

They are not solved by shame.

And they are not proof that your teen is “weak” or “far from God.”

Your teen is hurting. And hurting people need compassion, truth, and help.

A few anchors you can hold onto...

YOUR TEEN'S WORTH IS NOT UP FOR DEBATE. (PSALM 139:14)

GOD IS CLOSE TO THE BROKENHEARTED. (PSALM 34:18)

GOD REJOICES OVER HIS CHILDREN WITH LOVE. (ZEPHANIAH 3:17)

JESUS IS THE BREAD OF LIFE—OUR TRUE SOURCE OF FILLING AND PEACE. (JOHN 6:35)

A faith-based way to think about “control”.

**MANY TEENS USE FOOD AS A WAY TO FEEL CONTROL
WHEN LIFE FEELS SHAKY. AS PARENTS, WE CAN MODEL A
DIFFERENT KIND OF SECURITY:**

GOD IS STEADY, EVEN WHEN LIFE IS NOT.

A prayer for parents

Lord,

You see what I cannot fully see.

You know my child's heart, their fears, and their needs.

*Give me wisdom to respond with love and patience,
and courage to take the next right step.*

Help me listen well, speak gently, and lead with grace.

Bring the right people and resources into our lives.

*Heal what is hurting, restore what feels broken,
and remind us that You are near and at work—even now.*

*I place my child in Your care and trust You with what comes
next.*

In Jesus name,

Amen.

How to help prevent eating disorders

Here are a few habits that protect your home environment:

DON'T PRESSURE DIETING. FOCUS ON NOURISHMENT AND STRENGTH.

AVOID BODY SHAMING LANGUAGE (ABOUT YOUR TEEN, YOURSELF, OR OTHERS).

PRAISE EFFORT, CHARACTER, AND GROWTH MORE THAN APPEARANCE.

WATCH YOUR OWN "BODY TALK." TEENS NOTICE MORE THAN WE THINK.

CREATE A SAFE SPACE TO TALK WITHOUT FEAR OF A LECTURE.

SET WISE BOUNDARIES ON SOCIAL MEDIA WHEN NEEDED—WITH EXPLANATION AND CARE.

Where to Seek Help

If you believe your teen may have an eating disorder, reach out for help right away.

Professional support and referrals

- NEDA (National Eating Disorders Association): resources, screening, support ([National Eating Disorders Association][9])
- ANAD (National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders): support & resources

Crisis support (U.S.)

**IF YOU THINK YOUR TEEN IS IN IMMEDIATE DANGER
OR AT RISK OF SELF-HARM:**

CALL/TEXT 988 (SUICIDE & CRISIS LIFELINE)

You're Not Alone in This

If you're reading this with a knot in your stomach, you're already doing something brave: you're paying attention.

Eating disorder recovery is possible.

Your teen can heal.

And you do not have to walk this road alone.

Sources

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