

# How Educators and Coaches Can Help

## Take it Seriously



Eating disorders are illnesses that have biological and psychological components. The symptoms can be life threatening. Every organ system of the body can be damaged, including: brain, heart, kidney, cardiovascular, gastrointestinal, endocrine, skin and bones.

## Create a Safe Environment

Create an environment where students feel safe to discuss matters privately and confidentially. Remember the saying, "We have two ears and one mouth, so we should *listen* twice as much as we *talk*." Listening without judgment helps students feel safe enough to tell you what they're thinking, feeling, and doing.

- People with eating disorders are 18 times more likely to die early compared with people of similar age in the general population.
- Eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any psychiatric disorder.
- Eating disorders are the third most common chronic illness among adolescents.

## Prevention is the First Line of Defense

Coaches, teachers, and other school personnel are role models for young people. It's important to be a resource for them. The environment you create will help students and athletes form healthy attitudes about weight, body image, nutrition, strength and even success.

# Focus on Healthy Habits Rather Than on Body Weight or Fat

The factors listed below can enhance performance by improving both physical and psychological health. Emphasizing healthy behaviors in this way does *not* put students at risk for eating disorders.

- **Nutrition and Exercise** - Young people need information about healthy meal planning and regular exercise, especially if they're athletes. Educate your students by providing nutritional information through the school curriculum and as part of their athletic training. Having knowledge about healthy habits will help them avoid overeating or under-eating. Some examples are:
  - Eat Breakfast! Grandmother was right. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day. People who eat breakfast, eat healthier the rest of the day, have more energy, and do better in school.
  - Meals and snacks should be nutritional and well balanced.
  - Plan for a regular mealtime schedule rather than eating on the run or skipping meals. Students with unusual or no meal schedule are at risk for eating disorders.
- **Sleep and Rest** - Young adults and teens require between 8 to 9 hours of sleep a night. Many student-athletes sleep less than 6 hours a day. Encourage students to form regular sleep habits. The teen lifestyle of staying up late and getting up early is difficult to change but getting enough sleep is essential to health and wellbeing, which in turn helps to maximize both physical and mental performance. Lack of sleep can also lead to:
  - Body aches and pains
  - Irritability
  - Difficulty concentrating
  - Increased appetite
  - Decreased resilience and performance
- **Substance Use and Abuse** - Provide your students with information about the consequences of drug and alcohol use, and teach them interpersonal and behavior skills. Include information about:
  - Alcohol and prescription or illegal drugs
  - Nicotine
  - Performance enhancing drinks or supplements
  - Dietary or "stacker" supplements
  - Peer pressure
- **Psychological Factors** - Both thinking and emotional factors can affect performance. Educate young people to resist visual and social messages that imply they should achieve unrealistic body types such as extreme thinness. Mixed messages fill the media. Ultra-thin models happily eat fast food, while the nightly news reports an increasing number of Americans are obese. Replacing these messages with an emphasis on healthy eating habits can help the student make informed decisions and good choices for their own health and wellbeing.

## Strategies for Coaches

- De-emphasize weight as a strategy for athletic success. Be aware of your coaching style when success in a sport or activity is perceived to be related to weight. Athletes in these sports may develop eating disorders to attain a specific weight or body shape. Point out that low energy

intake contributes to low weight, which in turn can *decrease* performance and strength. See [At-Risk Students](#).

- Do not compare one athlete's body type and performance to another athlete's body/performance. The other high performance athlete may have an eating disorder.
- Remember young men and women are sensitive about their weight and body image. Remarks, comments and teasing a student about their body characteristics should not be allowed by anyone.
- Enhance performance without a focus on weight. Instead focus on healthy habits and behaviors.
- Promote development of mental and emotional skills and techniques. Among these are the use of imagery, positive self-talk, goal-setting, mental preparation, mindfulness, and relaxation training.
- Foster mutual connections among athlete and coach/trainer, team members, and other adults and peers.
- Increase education of athletes, coaches athletic trainers, and other sport personnel about disordered eating, eating disorders, nutrition, and the [Female Athlete Triad](#).
- Help students who are unable to participate in sports or activities due to an eating disorder, to focus on what they need to do to become healthy enough to return to their sport or activity.
- Consider the athlete as "injured" until evaluation and recommendations are offered. This should be standard policy.

## Strategies for Educators and School Personnel

- Ensure good communication with team members in school: school nurse, coach, counselors, teachers, etc.
- Clearly identify supportive school personnel for students and their families.
- Take students seriously for what they say, feel, and do.
- Help students appreciate and resist the ways television, magazines, and other media distort the true diversity of human body types.
- Encourage students to be active and to enjoy what their bodies can do and feel like.
- Promote self-esteem and self-respect in students.
- Convey caring and concern, rather than criticizing.
- Talk privately with the individual student if they need confidentiality. In your discussion focus on health and becoming healthy.
- Listen non-judgmentally and with compassion to the concerns of your students.