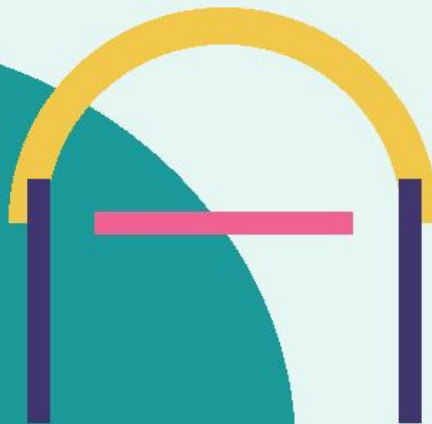


EATING DISORDER HELP FOR UNDER-18S

A safe first step for young people and the adults
beside them



SPACE TO BREATHE

A supportive information article by Maggie Learoyd

Eating Disorder Help for Under-18s

If food, eating, exercise or worries about your body are taking over your day, you deserve help now. You do not need a diagnosis, a certain appearance or the perfect words. Tell a trusted adult, even if part of you wants to keep it secret.

Tell one safe adult

Choose a parent, carer, teacher, school nurse, GP, counsellor or another adult you trust. You could say: 'I am struggling with eating and I need help.' If speaking is hard, show them this page, send a message or write down what has changed. If the first adult does not understand, tell another.

What may happen next

A GP can listen, check your physical health and refer you to a children and young people's eating-disorder service when needed. They may ask about eating, exercise, mood, physical symptoms and how long things have been difficult. You can ask for information in writing, processing time, a quieter room or support with communication.

For parents and carers

Stay calm, listen and take the concern seriously. Avoid comments about weight, appearance, calories or blame. Arrange a GP appointment promptly and share specific changes you have noticed. Follow advice from the treatment team about meals and safety. Keep warmth and ordinary connection in the relationship; your child is more than the eating disorder.

Neurodivergence and ARFID

Autistic young people and those with ADHD may experience sensory distress, difficulty recognising hunger, strong need for predictability, executive-function barriers or ARFID. Restriction is not always about weight or shape. Ask services to consider sensory needs and reasonable adjustments, and do not remove safe foods without specialist advice.

If you need help now

If a young person has collapsed, is severely confused, has chest pain, difficulty breathing, signs of serious dehydration, or is at immediate risk of harming themselves, call 999 or go to A&E.; For urgent advice call NHS 111. Childline is available on 0800 1111. You can also contact Beat for eating-disorder information and support.

School and daily life

A young person may need temporary support with attendance, concentration, PE, lunch, sensory load or medical appointments. Ask the school to identify one trusted contact and agree how privacy will be protected. Adjustments should reduce barriers without turning staff into food police. Plans should be coordinated with parents, carers and the clinical team, and reviewed as needs change.

How adults can listen

Begin by thanking the young person for telling you. Do not interrogate them or react with panic in front of them. Ask what feels hardest and what they need from you today. Be honest that you may need to involve health professionals to keep them safe. Give age-appropriate choices where possible, such as whether they want you beside them when calling the GP or whether they prefer to write information first.

Online content and comparison

Algorithms can repeatedly show dieting, body-checking, exercise or recovery content that increases comparison. Work together on boundaries: mute triggering accounts, reset recommendations, avoid sharing numbers and follow credible organisations. Do not remove all online connection as punishment; supportive communities may matter. Encourage the young person to tell an adult if content promotes dangerous behaviour or makes urges stronger.

Important

This resource offers general information and emotional support. It cannot diagnose an eating disorder and is not a substitute for medical assessment, specialist treatment or an individual care plan.

If someone is in immediate danger, has collapsed, has severe confusion, chest pain, difficulty breathing, signs of serious dehydration, or an immediate risk of self-harm or suicide, call 999 or go to A&E.; For urgent advice, contact NHS 111.

Further information

- NHS: Eating disorders overview - nhs.uk/mental-health/feelings-symptoms-behaviours/behaviours/eating-disorders/overview/
- NICE guideline NG69: Eating disorders: recognition and treatment - nice.org.uk/guidance/ng69
- Beat: Information and support - beateatingdisorders.org.uk

Beat Helpline: 0808 801 0677 | Childline (under 19): 0800 1111

Until next time, give yourself space to breathe.