

Strategies for Prevention and Early Intervention of Male Eating Disorders



National Eating Disorders Association

- **Recognize** that eating disorders do not discriminate on the basis of gender. Men can and do develop eating disorders.
- **Learn** about eating disorders and know the warning signs. Become aware of your community resources (treatment centers, self-help groups, etc.). Consider implementing an Eating Concerns Support Group in a school, hospital, or community setting to provide interested young men with an opportunity to learn more about eating disorders and to receive support. Encourage young men to seek professional help if necessary.
- **Understand** that athletic activities or professions that necessitate weight restriction (e.g., gymnastics, track, swimming, wrestling, rowing) put males at risk for developing eating disorders. Male wrestlers, for example, present with a higher rate of eating disorders than the general male population (Andersen, 1995). Coaches need to be aware of and disallow any excessive weight control or body building measures employed by their young male athletes.
- **Talk** with young men about the ways in which cultural attitudes regarding ideal male body shape, masculinity, and sexuality are shaped by the media. Assist young men in expanding their idea of “masculinity” to include such characteristics as caring, nurturing, and cooperation. Encourage male involvement in traditional “non-masculine” activities such as shopping, laundry, and cooking.
- **Demonstrate** respect for gay men, and men who display personality traits or who are involved in professions that stretch the limits of traditional masculinity; e.g., men who dress colorfully, dancers, skaters, etc.
- **Never emphasize** body size or shape as an indication of a young man’s worth or identity as a man. Value the person on the “inside” and help him to establish a sense of control in his life through self-knowledge and expression rather than trying to obtain control through dieting or other eating disordered behaviors.
- **Confront** others who tease men who do not meet traditional cultural expectations for masculinity. Confront anyone who tries to motivate or “toughen up” young men by verbally attacking their masculinity; e.g., calling names such as “sissy” or “wimp.”

- **Listen** carefully to a young man's thoughts and feelings, take his pain seriously, allow him to become who he is.
- **Validate** a young man's strivings for independence and encourage him to develop all aspects of his personality, not only those that family and/or culture find acceptable. Respect a person's need for space, privacy, and boundaries. Be careful about being overprotective. Allow him to exercise control and make his own decisions whenever possible, including control over what and how much he eats, how he looks, and how much he weighs.
- **Understand** the crucial role of the father and other male influences in the prevention of eating disorders. Find ways to connect young men with healthy male role models.

(Source: Adapted from Shiltz, T. (1997) "Suggestions for Improving Body Image Handout 7.1" in Eating Concerns Support Group Curriculum, Community Recovery Press, Greenfield, WI, used with permission.)