



Eating disorders for sport coaches, clubs and teams

As a fitness or sporting professional, you're in an ideal position to notice signs that someone may need support for an eating disorder, especially during the early stages, and refer them on to seek professional help.

What are eating disorders and disordered eating?

Eating disorders are psychological illnesses which can lead to serious physical consequences and complications. They are characterised by an unhealthy preoccupation with eating and body weight or shape. Disordered eating is problematic eating behaviour that fails to meet the clinical diagnosis of an eating disorder.

Disordered eating may involve short-term restrictive diets, which progress to chronic energy or nutrient restriction, binge eating, active and passive dehydration, use of laxatives, diuretics, vomiting, and diet pills with or without excessive training [1]. Disordered eating behaviours and dieting are a common indicators of developing an eating disorder.

Prevalence and health/performance consequences

Disordered eating and eating disorders can occur in any person or athlete, in any sport, at any time, crossing boundaries of gender, age, body size, culture, socio-economic background, athletic calibre and ability [2].

Disordered eating and/or an eating disorder can affect athletes and those playing sports in many ways both physically and mentally. One of the major health risks is developing low energy availability (LEA) and relative energy deficiency in sport (RED-S) which means the person is burning more energy in

training activities than they are consuming [2]. RED-S, especially if experienced over a period of time can negatively impact metabolic rate, menstrual function and bone health [2].

Some other potential consequences of disordered eating and/or eating disorders on athletes include an increased risk of injury, gastrointestinal complications, social isolation, heightened anxiety, unstable mood, reduced ability to cope in high pressure situations and reduced cognitive function/ critical thinking [6]. Any of these could be detrimental to a person's sporting performance capability and impact their mental and physical health.

How to identify eating disorders in athletes

It can be difficult to identify an eating disorder or disordered eating because the dietary and exercise needs for athletes differ from non-athletes, especially at an elite level. The information below compares the difference between an athlete's healthy focus on nutrition and exercise vs. disordered eating.

HEALTHY ATHLETE FOCUS

- Aim is performance enhancement
- Emphasis is on adequate intake rather than restriction
- Likely to revert to normal at end of sporting career Talking to your doctor

DISORDERED EATING AMONG ATHLETES

- Use of potentially harmful weight control measures
- Excessive exercise
- Extreme, restrictive or fad diets

- Self-induced vomiting
- Laxatives, diuretics, enemas, diet pills and stimulants

Things to watch for

Below is a list of common signs and symptoms of disordered eating and/or eating disorders coaches and teammates can watch out for.

- Taking supplements for weight loss/gain, or performance enhancement
- Steroid misuse
- Becoming anxious about missed sessions or disruption to exercise
- Training despite illness or injury
- Exercising to the point of exhaustion
- Exercising at unusual times (e.g. in a 24-hour gym, someone who comes at 3am without a legitimate reason)
- Talking about exercise or sport just as a means of burning calories or compensating for food eaten
- Fitness level not improving or even regressing despite still exercising
- Experiencing dizziness, light-headedness, or disorientation during or after exercise
- Low heart rate

What can coaches do?

Coaches concerned about an athlete's disordered eating behaviour should communicate their concerns with the athlete and consider supporting them to access professional support as early as possible. It is important to take warning signs of disordered eating very seriously.

Eating disorders have the highest mortality rates amongst all mental illness, as well as many negative health consequences (some irreversible).

Coaches are often viewed as role models and mentors to athletes, and are in a powerful position to assist with the prevention, management and intervention of eating disorders.

Coaches may be able to identify early warning signs and promote positive messages about body image and healthy eating and exercise by modelling appropriate attitudes and behaviours. You can provide athletes and their families with accurate information on optimal eating practices, good nutrition (and the impact of bad nutrition), and sports performance.

What should coaches say?

Before approaching someone about your concerns, it is important to be prepared. Consider the time and place you wish to approach them and choose a place where they will feel comfortable. It is a good idea to inform yourself about eating disorders (many resources can be found at the Eating Disorders Victoria website www.eatingdisorders.org.au) in order to gain a better understanding about why they may be engaging in disordered eating behaviours and ask about the treatment and referral pathways to assist them.

Remember it is not your responsibility to provide ongoing psychological assistance. Be clear about your role and what you can offer.

When communicating with the athlete ensure that you:

- Let them know they are safe talking to you. You are concerned for their welfare and that support is available
- Let them know admission of physical

or mental health problems will not jeopardise their participation in the sport, and identify how compromised health may put them at risk of injury

- Use 'I' statements rather than 'you' – this is less threatening
- Encourage the athlete to discuss any pressures they are experiencing as a result of their engagement in the sport and to find ways of managing it proactively
- Try to be considerate, non-threatening, empathetic and non-accusatory
- Focus on behavioural or psychological changes that you have noticed rather than weight, food consumption and appearance
- Don't seek to label or diagnose the person
- Encourage the athlete to manage their nutritional and sporting requirements in a healthy manner
- Remind the athlete of their positive personal qualities outside of their chosen sport, and discuss the benefits of recovery while encouraging seeking professional help
- Consider duty of care requirements
- Refer to relevant organisational policies and procedures if available

What not to say or do

- Don't threaten, bribe or manipulate the athlete
- It is not helpful to ignore the problem and hope that it will go away
- Don't try and convince the person that they are 'not fat'
- Eating disorders are mental illnesses and cannot be resolved with logic
- Try not to take on the role of a therapist or counsellor

- Instead, encourage the athlete to seek professional help. Don't encourage disordered or unhealthy behaviours

Further info and resources

Eating Disorders Victoria -

www.eatingdisorders.org.au

Call 1300 550 236, email edv@eatingdisorders.org.au

or drop into the office between 9.30am-4pm, Monday to Friday.

How Far is Too Far –

understanding the risk factors and warning signs related to eating, exercise and body image including specific information for fitness professionals - www.howfaristooofar.org.au

The National Eating Disorders

Collaboration (NEDC) – detailed information and tips including a coach and trainer toolkit.

www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/eating-disorders-athletes

Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) –

joint position statement with the NEDC regarding disordered eating and athletes - www.ais.gov.au/disorderedeating.

References

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