



February is Eating Disorder Awareness Month. Eating disorders are often misunderstood, minimized, or hidden, yet they remain among the most serious and complex mental health conditions affecting people today. They impact individuals of every age, background, body type, and gender, and they are never a simple matter of willpower, vanity, or diet gone too far. Eating disorders are rooted in a blend of biological, psychological, and social factors, and they require the same level of compassion and informed care as any other mental health condition. This special edition of our newsletter aims to offer deeper insight into what eating disorders truly are, how they develop, what signs to look for, and how we can better support ourselves and others.

Eating disorders encompass a spectrum of diagnoses, including anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, binge eating disorder, and avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder (ARFID). Though each condition presents differently, all involve a disrupted relationship with food, body image, and emotions. Anorexia nervosa typically involves severe food restriction, an intense fear of gaining weight, and a distorted perception of the body; importantly, it can occur in individuals of any body size, despite common stereotypes. Bulimia nervosa is marked by cycles of binge eating followed by compensatory behaviors such as self-induced vomiting, excessive exercise, or the misuse of laxatives. Binge eating disorder, the most common eating disorder, involves recurrent episodes of consuming unusually large amounts of food accompanied by feelings of guilt or loss of control, yet without the purging behaviors that characterize bulimia. ARFID, often overlooked or misinterpreted, does not center on body image at all; instead, it involves restrictive eating due to sensory sensitivities, fear of choking or vomiting, or a general lack of interest in food, which can still lead to significant physical and emotional consequences.

The development of eating disorders is influenced by a multifaceted combination of genetics, brain chemistry, temperament, life experiences, and cultural messages. Biologically, predispositions such as family history, hormonal differences, or neurological traits may increase vulnerability. Psychologically, factors such as low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, trauma, or perfectionistic tendencies can contribute significantly. Social environments also play a major role: weight stigma, dieting culture, the normalization of disordered eating, and the pressures amplified by social media all shape the way people

view their bodies and their relationship with food. Importantly, no single factor causes an eating disorder, and no one is at fault; these conditions emerge from complex interactions rather than personal choices.

Recognizing when someone may need help can be challenging, especially because many individuals hide symptoms or may not recognize the severity of their own behaviors. Warning signs can include obsessive thinking about food or weight, rigid food rules, shame around eating, frequent dieting, withdrawing from social events involving meals, dramatic mood changes, or physical symptoms such as dizziness, fainting, digestive issues, or fatigue. Anyone experiencing distress related to eating regardless of weight or appearance deserves support. There is no such thing as “not sick enough,” and seeking help early can make a meaningful difference.

Supporting a loved one with an eating disorder requires sensitivity, patience, and understanding. Helpful approaches include listening without judgment, expressing concern with a focus on emotional well-being rather than appearance, offering help in finding professional resources, and recognizing that recovery is a gradual process with ups and downs. Unhelpful behaviors include commenting on weight, pressuring someone to eat, simplifying the problem, or attempting to act as their therapist. Loved ones cannot force recovery, but their compassion, steadiness, and willingness to learn can be profoundly impactful.

Because eating disorders thrive in silence and stigma, expanding awareness and education is one of the most powerful tools we have. Reliable resources such as books on body neutrality, organizations dedicated to eating disorder support, professionally led support groups, and therapeutic approaches like cognitive-behavioral therapy for eating disorders (CBT-E), dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), and family-based treatment can offer guidance and hope. While no newsletter can replace specialized medical care, we hope this issue encourages readers to seek support, challenge harmful cultural norms, and approach both themselves and others with gentleness.

Ultimately, every person deserves a peaceful, nourishing relationship with food and their body. Eating disorders are serious but treatable, and recovery though nonlinear and deeply personal is absolutely possible. By increasing awareness, fostering compassionate conversations, and encouraging professional help when needed, we can contribute to a world where healing feels accessible, stigma loses its power, and no one has to struggle in silence.

If you, a family member, or a team member are struggling with feelings or emotions that interfere with your/their ability to engage in daily life, please feel free to reach out to our team at Miami-Dade Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Our EAP counselors focus on supporting employees with internal and external resources that assist in setting the foundation for restoration or enhancement of emotional and mental wellness. The EAP is providing virtual and on-site assessments for all employees that are in need of assistance.

To set up an assessment with an EAP counselor, please call (305)375-3293 or (645)224-2920 or email me at Genna.LoPresti@miamidade.gov. The hours of operation are Monday-Friday from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm. Please pass this on to your teams and departments as we continue to raise awareness on the vital and evolving topic of mental health. Thank you for your continued support of our county family.

Nationwide Resources

- National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) Helpline

Offers emotional support, information, and guidance.

Website: nationaleatingdisorders.org

- ANAD (National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders)

Free peer support groups, mentorship, and helpline services.

Website: anad.org

- The National Alliance for Eating Disorders – Support Groups

Provides free virtual clinician-led support groups for individuals and loved ones.

Website: allianceforeatingdisorders.com

- Overeaters Anonymous (OA)

Twelve-Step support fellowship for individuals struggling with compulsive eating behaviors.

Website: oa.org

- 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

24/7 immediate support for emotional distress or crisis/Call or text 988