



Eating disorders and the workplace

Although employers may be unaware, approximately 20% of all employees are experiencing a mental illness at any one time. It is important to promote a mentally healthy workplace to allow all staff to be supported, to help staff build skills and resilience, and to raise awareness and reduce the stigma attached to mental illness. By being aware of the signs and symptoms of eating disorders, you may be able to take steps which encourage an employee to seek professional help early. Employers and organisational leaders have a crucial role in committing to policies and practices which support and promote their employees' wellbeing. Everyone in the workplace can play a role in observing good practices of mental health, and promoting a supportive and positive work environment.

Signs that your colleague may have an eating disorder:

- ✔ Excessive weight loss or weight gain
- ✔ Having a preoccupation with food, skipping meals, having unusual portion sizes or developing ritualistic habits about the preparation and consumption of food
- ✔ Having difficulty concentrating
- ✔ Withdrawing from others
- ✔ Perfectionism - displayed in quality of work or self-imposed standards
- ✔ Displaying self-doubt; signs of depression

- ✔ Exercising compulsively
- ✔ Offering excuses for not eating, such as feeling ill or having just eaten
- ✔ Making negative comments about their appearance or the appearance of others
- ✔ Excessive time off from work
- ✔ Avoidance to attend social functions or work functions that involve food

What to do if you suspect a colleague may have an eating disorder:

Avoid making assumptions and judgements about the cause of their behaviours

Try to be considerate, non-threatening, empathetic and non-accusatory if you approach them to discuss your concerns

Consider the best person to approach the person of concern

Choosing the right words can be very hard. It can be helpful to think about what you are going to say before you talk to the person.

Try to maximise the chances of positive conversation. Your knowledge of the person will help you to determine the best way to approach the situation.

Choose a time to talk when you are both feeling calm and are unlikely to have any distractions. Pick a safe and comfortable place.

Use 'I' statements when communicating your concerns as this is less threatening and accusing

Try to focus on behaviours and feelings that you are concerned about rather than eating and weight. The person is more likely to recognise that they have been unhappy, withdrawn or miserable. They may be highly protective of their eating behaviours.

Respect the person's privacy

Let them know that support is available and that you are concerned for their welfare

Don't seek to label or diagnose your colleague

Be professional and respectful – do not step into a counselling role

Know your own limits and seek professional assistance where appropriate

Take the time to check in with the person and follow up if required

Keep the lines of communication open

Assist the person with managing any workplace stressors

Consider discussing some scheduled time off

Encourage the person to take scheduled breaks in the office as a form of self care at work

Line managers can assist the person with a manageable work plan

Refer to relevant organisational policies and procedures

Providing support to a colleague with an eating disorder:

A colleague's friends and family can provide excellent emotional and practical support in the journey to recovery.

Support groups can be a great way to create and build a supportive network with people who are experiencing similar difficulties.

Assistance from a professional such as a psychologist can provide emotional support as well as develop strategies to cope with the eating disorder.

Ask your colleague how you can help them! For example, inviting them to come for a walk after lunch might help ease their anxiety in the middle of the day.

How can EDV help?

Eating Disorders Victoria has a range of support services which include the Eating Disorders Victoria Hub, support groups, psychologists and educational workshops. The EDV website has many helpful resources and tips for both those with an eating disorder and those concerned about someone with an eating disorder.

EDV Education runs workshops and seminars for the general public to help the community understand eating disorders. Organisations can book as a group. This can be beneficial to learn about and recognise warning signs, risk factors, treatment options and the recovery process, as well as the different types of eating disorders.

You can also call the EDV Hub on 1300 550 236 or email edv@eatingdisorders.org.au if you are concerned about a co-worker, or need help approaching them with your concern.

Where can I go for help or information?

Beyond Blue: 1300 22 4636 <http://www.beyondblue.org.au/>

Suicide Line: 1300 651 251

Lifeline: 13 11 14 <http://www.lifeline.org.au/>

SANE Australia: 1800 18 7263 <http://www.sane.org/>

Working together: Promoting mental health and wellbeing at work: http://www.apsc.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/20530/working-together-mental-health-wellbeing-accessible.pdf

2010 Workers with Mental Illness: a Practical Guide for Managers
<http://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/2010-workers-mental-illness-practical-guide-managers>

Activities which increase awareness of mental health in the workplace: <http://www.beyondblue.org.au/about-us/programs/workplace-and-workforce-program/programs-resources-and-tools/workplace-online>

