



Eating Disorders in Athletes – A Coach’s Role

Understanding Disordered Eating

Eating Disorders are serious but treatable mental illnesses that can affect anyone regardless of gender, age, racial and ethnic identity, sexual orientation or socio-economic background. Cardiac arrest and suicide are the leading causes of death for people with eating disorders.

Research indicates that athletes are two to three times more susceptible to developing an eating disorder than their peers. (National Collegiate Athletic Association) Eating disorders occur in all sports, however there is evidence to suggest that athletes who participate in judged (vs refereed) or endurance sports, or sports with weight classifications may be at higher risk. Female puberty is also an increased risk period, although eating disorders can develop at any age.

Coaches have a responsibility to be aware of the symptoms of eating disorders and how they can negatively impact an athlete’s overall health.

Most Common Eating Disorders

Anorexia Nervosa

A mental illness characterized by behaviours that interfere with maintaining a minimum body weight.

Bulimia Nervosa

A mental illness characterized by periods of food restriction followed by binge eating, with recurrent compensating behaviours to “purge” the body of the food.

Binge Eating Disorder

A mental illness characterized by recurrent episodes of eating large quantities of food (often very quickly and to the point of discomfort). Individuals often feel a loss of control during the binge and experience shame, distress or guilt afterwards. Differs from Bulimia Nervosa, as those suffering from Binge Eating Disorder do not regularly use unhealthy compensatory measures (like purging) to counter the binge eating.

Muscle Dysmorphia

A mental illness where individuals experience a distorted body image and perceive themselves as small and weak even regardless of how strong or muscular they are.

Orthorexia Nervosa

Although orthorexia is not a recognized diagnosis, it does - like other forms of disordered eating - lead to an obsessive focus on food. People with orthorexia experience the need to eat “clean” and “pure” foods to the point that the individual becomes consumed with this way of life. Their behaviours and beliefs can lead to social isolation and ill health.

The Role of the Coach

Create a culture with your athlete(s)/team where mental health & illness is discussed openly and education about eating disorders is accessible. As a coach, the language you use is very important in creating this environment. It is important for coaches to explore their own values and attitudes regarding weight, dieting, and body image, and how their unconscious bias could inadvertently affect their athletes.

Tips on creating a healthy sporting environment

- Avoid comparing different athlete body types.
- Educate your athletes on the fueling requirements for your sport.
- Incorporate sport dietitians into your training. Utilize experts to educate your athletes about the dangers of disordered eating and the negative effects it will have in the short and long term on their performance and overall health.

- Discuss performance in terms of effective nutrition rather than weight.
- To improve performance, focus on other areas such as strength, endurance, mental and emotional skills training.
- Be aware that sport attire/uniforms may cause body consciousness and dissatisfaction in some athletes and lead to unhealthy comparison.
- For sports with weight classifications, weight should be discussed openly and transparently.
- Where weigh-ins are required, ensure they are conducted by a trainer, dietitian or medical professional, and in a supportive environment.
- Promote healthy eating, rather than focusing on restricting or avoiding “bad food”. Emphasize eating a minimum caloric intake of (nutritionally healthy) food, rather than a punitive upper limit.
- Maintain a zero-tolerance culture toward weight stigma (i.e. negative attitudes towards people who are perceived to have excess body weight).

Signs of Disordered Eating

Eating disorders have physical and psychological indicators that coaches should be aware of.

Physical signs

- Frequently go on diets.
- Count every calorie.
- Spend a lot of time exercising in order to burn off calories or to punish self for eating, instead of to achieve sport goals.
- Secretive about eating habits with preference to eat alone.
- Consume large amounts of food in a short amount of time.
- Develop strict rules about what foods can and cannot eat.
- Avoidance of social situations where eating will be involved.
- Trouble focusing and concentrating.

Psychological signs

- Thoughts revolve around what they will eat or not eat.
- Think weight loss will bring happiness.
- Believe being thinner will attract more friends and increase popularity.
- Feel worthless or not deserving of food.
- Deny hunger and sometimes don't eat even when hungry.
- Experience feelings of guilt or shame whenever eating.
- Feel like eating is one of the only things that can be controlled in life.

Intervention

Treat an eating disorder as you would a physical injury and connect the athlete to a medical expert. While they are receiving treatment, keep them involved with the team/sport, in consultation with their doctor.

Having an athlete in treatment is a significant positive step, however it can also present new challenges for athlete-coach relationship. It's not unnatural for you as the coach to feel apprehensive about what role you should play in their recovery and with their treatment team.

The best approach is to be proactive in your efforts to work with your athlete's treatment team. Respect confidentiality, ask questions and learn about the different medical professionals on the team.

The most effective treatment plan for an athlete is one where all members of their support team, including doctors, psychologists, family & coaches work together.

References & Resources

The Canadian Centre for Mental Health and Sport (CCMHS)
www.ccmhs-ccsms.ca

National Eating Disorder Information Centre (NEDIC)
www.nedic.ca

National Eating Disorder Association - Coach & Athletic Trainer Toolkit
www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/toolkits

Ontario Community Outreach Program for Eating Disorders
www.ocoped.ca

Kids Help Phone

 **Text CONNECT to 686868**

 **1-800-668-6868**

 **kidshelpphone.ca/live-chat**