

Guiding Principles

Aims

These guiding principles have been developed to support health and care professionals to better meet the needs of young people with disordered eating. We hope it will also help to raise awareness with parents, carers, teachers, youth workers, and other groups. This work aims:

- to raise awareness and understanding that not all young people presenting with disordered or constrained eating necessarily have an eating disorder
- to ensure those referring and assessing young people consider the underlying causes and do not focus solely on eating, and;
- to facilitate joint working approaches between physical and mental health teams, as well as between inpatient, community, and home treatment teams.

Guiding principles

Assumptions – do not assume that all young people who are restricting their eating have an eating disorder. Eating disturbances of all sorts, including restricted eating or acute food refusal, may be features of a range of patterns of difficulties.

Referral, assessment, and treatment – planning should be holistic including an assessment of mental health covering history of other disorders, young person’s developmental history including feeding/eating history, family history and social context, rather than just focusing on eating.

Joint working – for this group, labelling a young person as having an eating disorder before this is clear, and focussing too quickly on a plan of eating disorder-focused treatment and inpatient admission, can be ineffective and may lead to an escalation in the presentation. Instead, joint working approaches are recommended for care and treatment. This includes mental and physical health teams as well as between inpatient, community and home treatment teams. This approach can help teams to confidently manage both the mental and physical health risks presented by young people with disordered eating.

Admission – when possible, support from home treatment teams or community teams and avoidance of psychiatric inpatient admission are recommended. Nasogastric tube (NG tube) feeding can result in increased length of stay. Where inpatient stay and NG tube feeding is needed, it is strongly recommended that there is a clear plan in place to discontinue its use.

Communication – ensure you communicate effectively with the young person and parents/carers throughout the referral, assessment, and treatment process. This can help the young person and parents/carers feel more involved and aware of what is happening and when. Regular communication can make a big difference.

Expectations – it is important to manage expectations of young people and parents/carers so that they aren't expecting a specific diagnosis or treatment pathway. Not being accepted into a service or not getting the diagnosis you were expecting can be very difficult.

Support – getting an unexpected diagnosis or treatment pathway may leave a young person feeling invalidated or rejected, and that what they are going through is less serious and less deserving of treatment. It is important to support young people through this, but also to emphasise that their needs are as important and they are as deserving of help, and to ensure that they are able to receive the intensity of support they need for any other identified needs.

Additional resources – double check with young people and parents/carers that they have access to, and can engage with, any additional resources or training. This should include those that are waiting to access treatment and throughout the treatment and recovery process. Examples of resources could include support from Beat, from Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) in their local areas, access to crisis support and other wellbeing initiatives.

Transitions – can be difficult, whether it is between inpatient and community settings, from adolescent to adult services, stepping down from treatment, or going back into the care of their GP and school. Joint planning and communication with the young person and parents/carer about what to expect at all stages can help them feel more on board with next steps and more confident to move forward.