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WHAT TO SAY COACH'S GUIDE

Tips to Prevent Eating Disorders& What to Say When Concerned

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Hey, Coach!

Most eating disorders start with body dissatisfaction and build over time — but you can help set young people on a different path. As a coach, you're often the first line of defense. You set the tone for how athletes think about their bodies, food, and performance.

The good news? A few simple actions and a bit of awareness can make a huge difference. This guide will help you recognize the signs, know what to say, and create a team environment that supports both mental and physical health.

Let's get started.

Tips for Eating Disorder Prevention in Athletes

- **Focus on performance, not weight.** De-emphasize weight and appearance. Instead, talk about skill, strength, and endurance.
- **Avoid suggesting weight loss or food restriction.** In many cases, weight loss is unnecessary, risky, and outside the athlete's control. Restricting food can quickly lead to harmful behaviors that put both performance and well-being at risk.
- **Promote realistic, individualized goals.** Help athletes measure progress based on effort and ability, not body size.
- **Avoid singling out athletes based on size or weight.** Calling attention to body size can create shame and comparison, even when that's not the intent.
- **Keep body comments off the table.** Avoid commenting on athletes' bodies — even compliments can reinforce harmful focus.

Go Deeper: What to Say to Young Athletes About Body Image, Food & Exercise

Eating Disorder Warning Signs

- Preoccupation with weight, calories, or food.
- Cutting out entire food groups (e.g., carbs, fats).
- Dieting. Period.
- Skipping meals or eating extremely small meals or meals that do not provide much energy.
- Avoiding team meals or food-related situations.
- Compulsive or excessive exercise beyond normal training and being very rigid in their exercise schedule.
- Sudden weight loss or gain.
- Overuse injuries, especially stress fractures.
- A strong need for control or perfectionism.

If you notice several of these signs, trust your instincts — early intervention can make a difference.

Go Deeper: Additional Warning Signs & Misconceptions

If You're Concerned About an Athlete

1. Lead with compassion. Listen first.
2. Don't comment on weight changes. Keep the focus on overall well-being.
3. Share what you've noticed with care.
   - "I've noticed you seem tired and are skipping meals, and I'm worried about your health."
   - "You seem more fatigued at practice lately, and this concerns me."
4. Acknowledge your role. Acknowledge you don't have all the answers or the expertise, but others do. Share that you will help connect them to that additional support.
5. Involve parents and professionals early. The sooner support begins, the better the outcomes.
6. Follow up. Checking back with the athlete and their parents shows care and reinforces that their health matters most.

Go Deeper: A Resource to Share: What Parents Can Do If They're Worried About Their Athlete

Additional Resources

- **WithAll: What to Say Coaches Certification & Challenge**

  Tools and training to help you talk confidently about food, body image, and health.

- **National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA): Coaches & Trainers Toolkit**
- **Association of Applied Sport Psychology: Eating Disorder Resources**
- **Books**
  - **Sick Enough** by Dr. Jennifer Gaudiani
  - **Finding Your Sweet Spot** by Rebecca McConville

Go Deeper:
Access links to all of these resources

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This guide is one piece of WithAll's work to help kids feel good in their bodies and with food. That work only happens because individuals and businesses fund it directly. If it helped you, consider making a gift at withall.org/donate.

Get Financial Help

If you or someone you love is facing an eating disorder, you are not alone. Our Recovery Support Program provides grants for groceries and housing during intensive treatment. Apply at withall.org/apply.

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