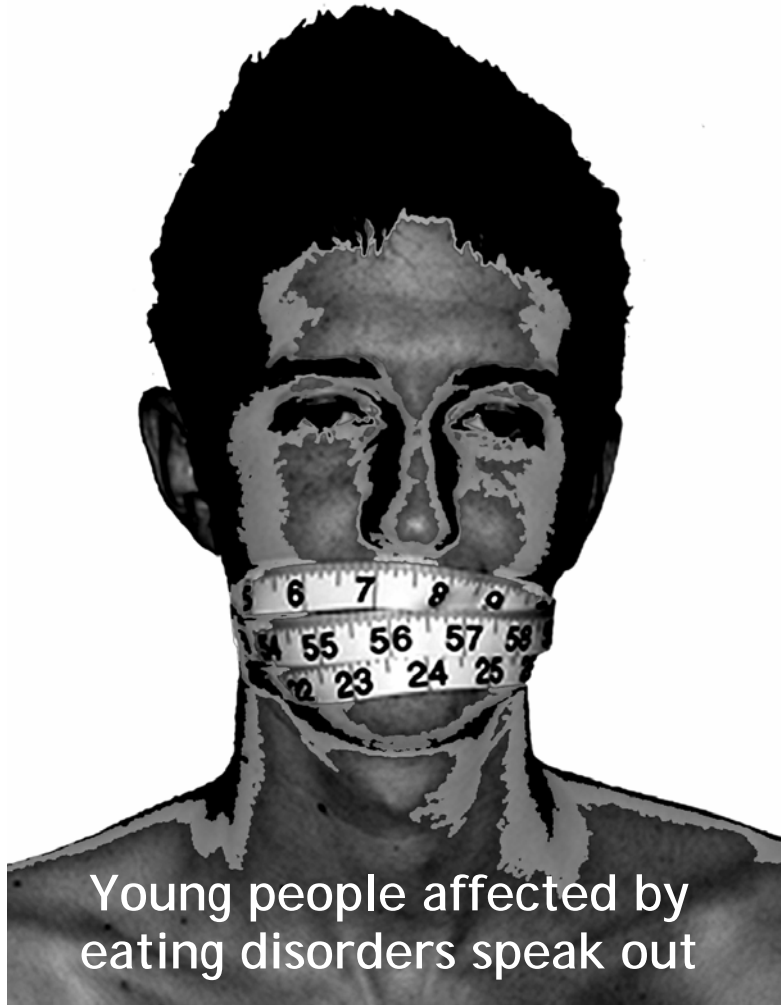


“Time to tell”



Young people affected by
eating disorders speak out

45% of young people feel they couldn't tell anyone
about their eating disorder

62% waited more than 6 months before they sought help

*“I had continual arguments with my family that I was fine,
I wasn't. I was dying”*

Report published 6 February 2006 by
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Time to tell

Eating disorders are still misunderstood and mistaken. People see them as trivial and self inflicted, instead of serious and life threatening mental illnesses. 1.1 million people in the UK are affected, and 20% of those who become seriously ill can die prematurely. Young people aged 14-25 are most at risk.

Someone with an eating disorder will often find it extremely difficult to tell anyone about their problem, even once they recognize it themselves, and this can lead to a dangerous delay in treatment.

Early treatment is crucial for recovery, and to avoid the long term consequences to physical health and mental wellbeing.

We surveyed 1,000 young people with personal experience of an eating disorder, and asked them key questions about who they could tell; how long it took to seek help; and what change they would wish for in the world to make a difference to eating disorders.

Their answers were startling, and we were surprised by what we learnt from them. We are committed to continuing this learning, and to keep listening to what they want to tell us. There has been too much secrecy and silence. It's time to tell.

Time to tell parents

A recent survey¹ asked parents about eating disorders and the answers they gave were very different from what the young people we spoke to told us.

90% of parents said they felt confident about discussing eating disorders with their children, but 45% of young people said they couldn't tell anyone about their problems.

40% of parents said they would recognise the early signs, but only 21% of young people said their parents had noticed the eating disorder first.

We want to make sure that parents have the information they need so that they can talk to their children if they are concerned. And young people need to feel confident that in telling their parents, they will be understood.

"I had continual arguments with my family that I was fine. I wasn't. I was dying"

"My parents had a very hard time understanding what I was going through"

"The change I would wish for is for parents to understand more about how they can help. My family didn't know how to deal with it"

Time to tell the doctor

The sooner someone gets the help they need, the more likely they are to make a full recovery. Yet 62% of young people told us they waited more than 6 months before seeking help. This crucial delay could have given the eating disorder time to take hold of them, and for their treatment to take longer to be effective.

And then doctors themselves have said they need to be better at making early diagnoses².

We want to make sure that GP training on eating disorders is up to date, and gives them the skills to make diagnoses early- so that the road to recovery can begin as soon as possible.

"I couldn't find help when I needed it, and when I did I felt like a freak"

"Why is it that when you have a broken leg, they know exactly what to do, but when you go for help with an eating disorder, they are flummoxed?"

"The change I would wish for is for doctors to treat you with the same compassion as if you had a physical illness"

Time to tell the Media

The media is playing an increasingly powerful role in all our lives. We are surrounded every day by ever more sophisticated ways of advertising and promotion of a skinny ideal. Eating disorders are not caused by the media- it's more complex than that- but young people had very strong views about the media's part and how it could help.

We asked if there was anything in the world that could help prevent eating disorders, and 42% said the media showing more 'real' bodies. This compared to parents understanding and doctors knowing more at 20% each.

It is time to tell the truth about eating disorders. They are a serious mental illness, with serious consequences if untreated. There are young people who are willing to tell their story like it is- and they are ready for it to be heard.

"Why can't the media promote healthy, normal sized people?"

"It gives us the impression that thin is beautiful and that we have to be thin if we want happiness and success in life"

"The change I would wish for is to stop praising thin celebrities and constantly printing articles about dieting over and over"

References

1 BBDO TNS online panel survey December 2005

2 Health of the Nation survey November 2005 by Dr Foster for Norwich Union found 69% of GPs felt the NHS failed patients with eating disorders www.healthofthenation.com/the_index4.htm

The call to action

EDA calls on all political parties to make a commitment to listen and respond to these future electorates' views. Eating disorders are still too often misunderstood, misdiagnosed and even left untreated - leaving young lives at risk and young potential wasted.

"The political door is now open for an intense educational programme on eating disorders. Mental health and food are high on the political agenda"

Dr Ian Gibson MP, Science and Technology Commons Select Committee, and chair/member of many all party health groups

"It is important that people with eating disorders know where to turn for advice, feel able to ask for help, and receive constructive assistance when they seek it. This important research indicates that eating disorders sufferers frequently do not seek or receive the quality of treatment needed to overcome their conditions. I know from my own constituency experience the lack of specialised help and support."

Professor Steve Webb, MP Liberal Democrat Shadow Secretary of State for Health

"Eating disorders are very often a manifestation of underlying emotional or behavioural problems. While anorexia can become recognisable as young people become progressively thinner, bulimia can go unrecognized for a long time. In either case, early intervention is important, yet far too often services are not available, or are subject to a 'postcode lottery' as affected one of my constituents. This research supports our call for increased priority for mental health services"

Andrew Lansley MP Conservative Shadow Secretary of State for Health

"What this report highlights is the need to help parents and GPs listen to both overt and covert aspects of an eating disorder. Research has proved that the earlier treatment and help is available the better the outcome."

Professor Janet Treasure, King's College London, Chief Medical Advisor to EDA

"In today's body- and image-conscious culture, where to be very thin is considered beautiful and to be at normal weight is unacceptable, dieting and eating disorders are increasingly common. Biology plays a cruel trick on young people in Britain's fat-phobic society. It is time to tell young people, parents, the medical profession and the media that patients with mental illnesses must be accorded the same respect and treatment as those presenting with physical problems."

Dr. Peter Rowan, eating disorders consultant at the Priory Hospital Roehampton

Eating Disorders Association

Eating Disorders Association (EDA) is a UK wide charity providing information, help and support for people affected by eating disorders and, in particular, anorexia, bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorder. There is more information about eating disorders on our website at www.edauk.com and background briefing information for the media at www.edauk.com/media

Details of local services are freely available to callers ringing our helplines...

Telephone Helpline 0845 634 1414 Youthline 0845 634 7650 (Up to 18 years of age).
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