#### Verified by Psychology Today



**Gia Marson, Ed.D., and Danielle Keenan-Miller, Ph.D.** The Binge Eating Prevention Plan

### **EATING DISORDERS**

# 6 Tips for Students Attending College With an Eating Disorder

How to be proactive about eating disorder recovery during the college years.

Posted September 29, 2022

Reviewed by Gary Drevitch



**KEY POINTS** 

• Transitioning to college can be full of challenges that may trigger or worsen eating disorder behaviors.

• With careful preparation, such as establishing support early on, eating disorder recovery is possible through the college years.



Source: PeopleImages/istockphoto

times.

### by Gia Marson, Ed.D.

Nourishing your body well is a must during times of transition because growth requires extra physical and psychological energy. College is one of those

"Real hope combined with real action has always pulled me through difficult times. Real hope with doing nothing has never pulled me through." — Jenni Schaefer

Attending college presents a lot of firsts: The first time living away from home, in a new town, with a new routine, and more responsibilities. Coupled with data that eating disorder (ED) prevalence has increased since 2020, new challenges

on track.

### College and recovery

The college years can be incredibly exciting, but they come with the need to adapt, especially when you are struggling with food or in recovery from an eating disorder. There's ample evidence of long-term consequences if an ED is not treated appropriately or if there are gaps in treatment. Therefore, knowing how to start or sustain a recovery plan is critical to your health.

A recent study showed that from 2000 to 2018, the prevalence of all types of EDs doubled for females and males. Globally, all types of EDs increased from around 15 years of age and remained at a peak until around 30, with a slow decline seen after age 35.

### Changes come with challenges

Recognizing the risks you may face during your time at college can help you cope. With ample preparation and realistic actions, you can avoid setbacks—or bounce back from them

- Creating a schedule that works with your recovery habits.
- Accessing food based on dining halls, meal plans, or your own preparation.
- Navigating new relationships, boundaries, living environments, and responsibilities.
- Adapting to different treatment settings and providers.
- Combating feelings of insecurity.
- Missing family meals or your home-based support system.
- Independent time management of academics, activities, sleeping, and socializing.
- Establishing a sense of belonging.
- Dealing with urges to isolate, binge eat, purge, over-exercise, or skip meals.
- More opportunities for negative, social, and body comparisons.
- Tuning in to yourself, despite less privacy.
- Identifying it when the need arises for new coping skills.

"[J]ust wanted to send out some encouragement to everyone out there struggling with weight or body issues or emotional eating...it's never too late to start improving yourself and trying to be the best version of YOU possible. It's not a race and it's not a competition..."—Rebel Wilson

### Tips for sustaining recovery

Start by imagining that recovery is possible for everyone, and that includes you. Hope makes it easier to be flexible, to adapt, and to get back up after a recovery slip. There are real actions you can take to set yourself up for success in your college recovery.

save your life." —Lily Collins

- 1. Ensure you have support. If you have an eating disorder, professional guidance gives you the comfort of knowing that someone understands what you are facing and that you are well supported. Though universities often have limited resources, they almost always have strong ties with local ED therapists, dietitians, primary care doctors, and psychiatrists. Your college counseling center is an excellent resource for community referrals.
- 2. Make a specific plan for eating at college. College schedules vary from day to day, so being proactive is vital. If you are living in a dorm, when will you have meals and snacks based on the breaks in your academic schedule, considering the hours and locations of various dining options that take your meal plan? If you live in an apartment, have you made a list of meals and snacks that are quick and easy to prepare or pick up? Avoid skipping meals or going long stretches without food because getting too hungry can trigger ED thoughts and behaviors.
- 3. Set exercise limits. There are a lot of ways to exercise on college campuses, so choose what you enjoy or try something new. You will probably be walking or biking a lot—which may be all you need for a mental health boost

knows your recovery goals or your relapse prevention plan. Deciding on explicit limits for exercise will help you know if you go beyond them. And if you exceed your limit, do not keep it a secret.

- 4. **Maintain positive relationships.** Meaningful connections with others (and with yourself) is a key to recovery. When you find yourself getting stuck in ED thoughts or actions, reach out to chat or spend time with people. Your relationships can provide support when you need it and let fun into your life. So, when you have downtime, invest in nurturing your relationships, not the ED. This includes noticing when you could use some nurturing yourself, such as rest, quiet, exercise, or tuning in.
- 5. **Build a multidimensional life.** Being at college is an ideal time to expand yourself. There is a wide range of opportunities for relationships, involvement, learning, and growth. In stark contrast, being immersed in an eating disorder is limiting, isolating, and tiresome. That's why making your life bigger, more meaningful, and more dynamic helps shift your attention to things that matter more. Instead of spending time in a mental obsession with food, weight, or shape, cultivate other, more interesting aspects of your identity.

hunger and fullness cues. Keep in mind that there are natural, negative consequences to pushing beyond your body's limits. Sleep deprivation and intense stress have a physiological impact on appetite and satiety. Therefore, take time to sleep well, unwind from especially stressful days, and heal from any illness.

### **THE BASICS**

What Are Eating Disorders?

Find a therapist to heal from an eating disorder

### Summary

"As scary as this can be I want you to know no matter how broken you feel, and how seemingly unlikely it is, we are never too broken to heal." — Jonathan Van Ness

Being in recovery during college requires honesty and hope. Recognize your challenges early on and identify a personal coping plan to deal with and overcome them. A proactive ap-

### opening up.

#### References

Boughton, K., Boyle, S., O'Byrne, R., & Lumley, M. (2021). Transitioning to University with a mental illness: Experiences of youth and their parent. Journal of Adolescent Research, 1–27. <u>https://doi.org/10.1177/07435584211014842</u>

Byrom, N., Batchelor, R., Warner, H., & Stevenson, A. (2022). Seeking support for an eating disorder: A qualitative analysis of the university student experience—accessibility of support for students. Journal of Eating Disorders, 10, 1–14. <u>https://doi.org/10.1186/s40337-022-00562-5</u>

Galmiche, M., Déchelotte, P., Lambert, G., & Tavolacci, M. (2019). Prevalence of eating disorders over the 2000–2018 period: A systematic literature review. The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, 109(5), 1402–1413. <u>https://doi.org/10.1093/ajcn/nqy342</u>



