



Eating Disorders in the Workplace

Being a friendly and approachable employer is always important, but it is even more so when a member of staff has an eating disorder. A key feature of management is taking an interest in the welfare of staff members in order for them to be able to achieve their potential.

Most people with an eating disorder are hard working and good at their jobs. They may stand out as striving for perfection or going to extreme lengths to achieve deadlines and get work finished. However, they may also isolate themselves from other team members in an effort to keep their eating disorder a secret.

Certain jobs tend to attract eating disordered people

It is not uncommon for someone with an eating disorder to work in vocations that may be triggering or potentially have other eating disordered employees. Some typical job types include:

- ❖ Food industry such as catering
- ❖ The caring professions such as nursing, social services, health and dietetics
- ❖ Work in fitness and sport, dance and theater
- ❖ Modelling, jobs in the fashion industry and in PR and publicity

An individual working in the food industry may surround him or herself with food in order to keep an element of control about their working life. With vocations such as modelling, competition is everywhere and sometimes those WITHOUT an eating disorder are considered abnormal.

Please bear in mind that the examples of jobs given above is only a guideline and that there are many eating disordered people in completely different working environments (e.g. office/desk jobs). All employers should be concerned about the welfare of their staff, but those in the industries above should be especially vigilant.

Finding out about a staff member's eating disorder

Generally speaking, there are three main ways an employer will find out about a member of staff's eating disorder:

1. The individual confides in their employer, for reasons which could include having to reveal information for a medical, an explanation for not wanting to attend staff lunches, or simply needing somebody to talk to about their problems.
2. Another member of staff raises their concerns with management. In this instance, it may be helpful to have a confidential chat with the individual to let them know you have been approached and you are willing to help in any way you can. Of course, the employer should always be aware that the member of staff in question may NOT have an eating disorder, however it is still important to offer support.
3. Management notice changes in an employee's behavior, attitude or performance. This may be accompanied by physical signs, such as frequent trips to the bathroom

(particularly after eating), avoiding staff events where food will be present, or persistent talk of weight loss and dieting.

How can I help a staff member who has an eating disorder?

People with an eating disorder have the same needs as other members of staff. They need to feel valued, accepted and that they are making a positive contribution to the company/organization. It is not necessary to treat an eating disorder differently to any other health concerns being experienced by staff members.

If you are an employer, it might be helpful to let the person know what is required from them in the workplace. Of course, they will not expect preferential treatment, but clear guidelines and managerial feedback can be beneficial.

The member of staff may require sick leave to attend hospital appointments, therapy or group sessions. Again, the nature of their illness is largely irrelevant - all employees should expect the same treatment if they need to go to medical appointments.

Some important points to remember:

- ❖ An eating disorder is not an attention seeking tactic. On the contrary, most eating disordered people would prefer that others NOT know about their illness.
- ❖ It is up to the employee whether or not they want information disclosed to their work colleagues. It might be helpful to come to an arrangement about what answers should be given by management if other staff members make enquiries about the individual concerned.
- ❖ An eating disorder is not a barrier to success. Indeed, people with an eating disorder are probably some of the most effective, hard working and loyal members of a workforce.

Where can I find more information?

More information on eating disorders in the workplace can be obtained from the UK Eating Disorders Association. Go to their Web site at <http://www.edauk.com> for further details.

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