

Module 7, Lesson 1 Handout:

Common Symptoms in Eating Disorders

The title “Common Symptoms in Eating Disorders” is almost an oxymoron because eating disorders can present in so many different ways. Not only are there several different types of eating disorders, but people with the same diagnosis can experience totally different symptoms - or sometimes even no symptoms at all.

Though every client with an eating disorder will be unique, there are some common physical issues that people with eating disorders may experience, including:

- Stomach cramps, other non-specific gastrointestinal complaints (constipation, acid reflux, etc.)
- Abnormal labs
 - Anemia
 - Low thyroid and hormone levels
 - Low potassium
- Slow heart rate
- Dizziness and fainting
- Feeling cold all the time
- Sleep problems
- Menstrual irregularities
 - Amenorrhea
 - Irregular periods
 - Only having a period while on hormonal contraceptives (this is not considered a “true” period)
- Dental problems
 - Enamel erosion
 - Cavities
 - Tooth sensitivity
 - Tooth discoloration
- Dry skin
- Dry and brittle nails
- Swelling around area of salivary glands
- Fine hair on body (lanugo)
- Thinning of hair on head or dry and brittle hair
- Muscle weakness
- Yellowish skin
- Cold, mottled hands and feet or swelling of feet
- Poor wound healing

- Impaired immune functioning

One of the trickiest things about identifying an eating disorder is that many people may show no signs or symptoms at all, yet are still struggling and sick. At least 30 million people in the United States suffer from an eating disorder, and many of these people don't seek the help they need because they don't feel "sick." Eating disorders fall under the umbrella of mental health diseases, and physical symptoms are just one small piece of puzzle.

The SCOFF (Sick, Control, One, Fat, Food) questionnaire was developed by John F Morgan, Fiona Reid and J Hubert Lacey at St George's Hospital Medical School in London in 2000 to help identify patients with anorexia and bulimia. These are good go-to questions to ask if you sense a client might be struggling with an eating disorder..

- Do you make yourself Sick because you feel uncomfortably full?
- Do you worry that you have lost Control over how much you eat?
- Have you recently lost more than One stone (14 lb) in a 3 month period?
- Do you believe yourself to be Fat when others say you are too thin?
- Would you say that Food dominates your life?

If your client answers "yes" to two or more of these questions, you need to use your professional judgement about continuing work with this client and/or referring this client to a qualified specialist. If this person doesn't have a team already, you may want to suggest a great eating disordered therapist as a place to start. If eating disorders aren't in your wheelhouse, help this client find a health care practitioner who specializes in this field.