

# Social work and supporting carers of adults with an eating disorder

IASW SWAMH Conference 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023

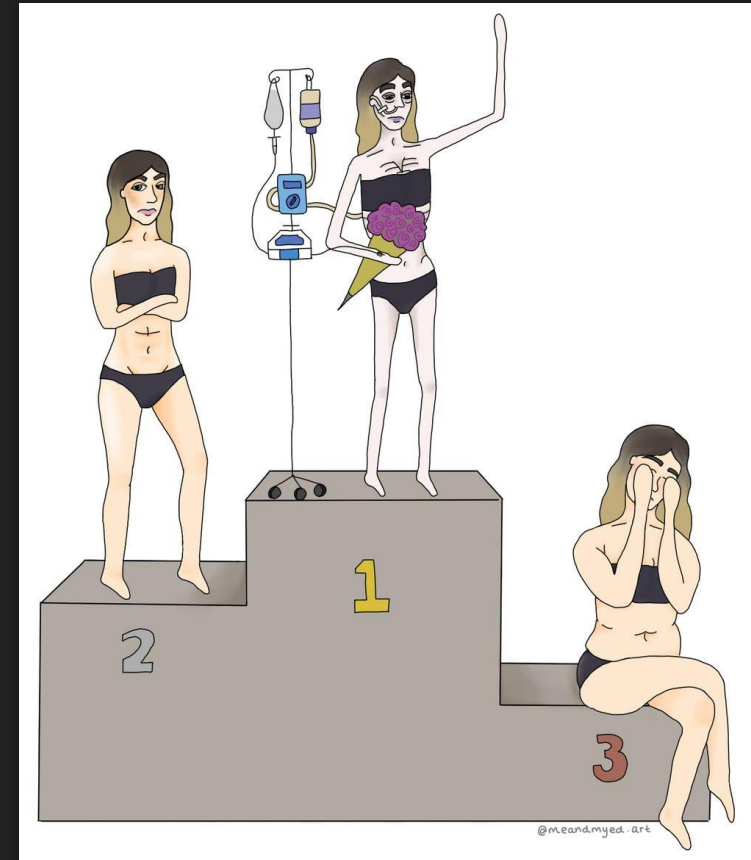
Presented by Helen Kilgannon and Maria Swan

# Role of Social Work

- “Social work aims to empower individuals, groups and communities to take charge of their own lives within their own environment and social context. It does this through its unique knowledge base which has developed from the integration of sociological, psychological and other relevant theories and practice” (IASW)

# What is an eating disorder?

- Eating disorders are complex psychological disorders that affect every aspect of a person's functioning.
- Eating disorders such as anorexia, bulimia and binge eating include extreme emotions, attitudes and behaviours surrounding weight and food issues.
- They are serious emotional and physical problems that can have life-threatening consequences for women and men.
- Recovery is possible



# TYPES OF EATING DISORDERS

1



## Anorexia nervosa

Having an unrealistic idea about body image and an intense fear of gaining weight.

## Bulimia Nervosa

It is binge eating followed by purging.



2

3



## Binge eating disorders (BED)

Even if they aren't hungry, people with BED may consume a large amount of food in a short period of time.

## Rumination Disorder

Individual regurgitates food they previously consumed and then re-chews and re-swallows it or spits it out.



4

5



## Pica Disorder

It is consuming things that are not considered food.

## Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (AFRID)

A person avoids particular meals or categories of foods, or has a restricted intake in terms of overall amount eaten, or both.



6

7



## Other Eating Disorders

Compulsive overeating, Diabulimia, Drunkorexia



# Potential Signs of an Eating Disorder



**Excessive exercise**



**Preoccupation  
with feeling fat**



**Abnormal  
electrolyte levels**



**Intense fear  
of gaining weight**



**Unusually large  
intake of food**



**Anxiety around  
or avoidance of  
eating**

# eating disorders

## MYTHS v FACTS

You can tell someone has an eating disorder by **looking at them.**



Eating disorders affect people of all shapes and sizes. It is simply not possible to know what someone is experiencing just by looking at them...



**Men** don't have eating disorders.



Eating disorders do not only affect women and girls, they impact men and boys as well.



You **can't recover** from an eating disorder.



Many people who have eating disorders can and do make full recoveries.



Eating disorders are **not** mental health issues.



Eating disorders are recognised by the World Health Organisation as mental health issues.

*all sources available from Headline and Bodywhys Ireland*

**HEADLINE** *Supporting media, changing attitudes*



# Treatment of Eating Disorders (NICE)

01

include psychoeducation about the disorder

02

include monitoring of weight, mental and physical health, and any risk factors

03

be multidisciplinary and coordinated between services

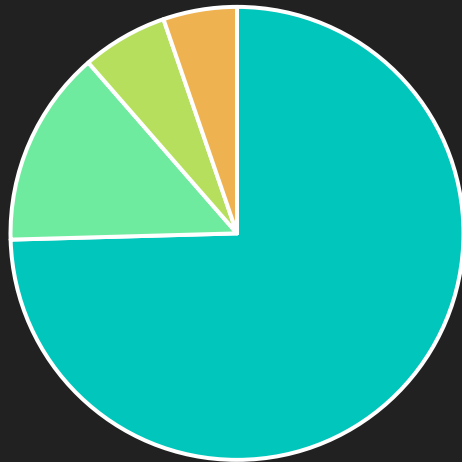
04

involve the person's family members or carers (as appropriate)

# Shrinking life of an Eating Disorder

With Eating Disorder

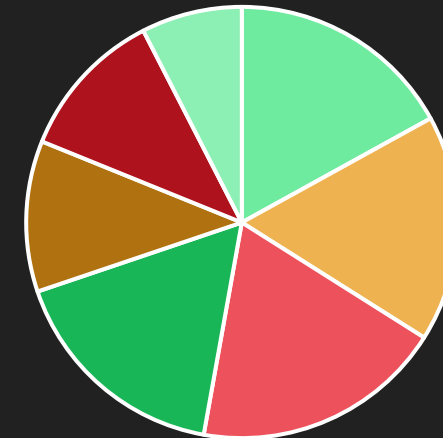
Self Worth



■ Weight, Shape, Food ■ Studies  
■ Work ■ Relationships

Recovery & Wellbeing

Self Worth



■ Friends ■ Family  
■ Relationship ■ Job  
■ Evening class ■ Exercise for fun  
■ Weight, Shape, Food





# What is a Carer?

## The National Carers' strategy

Dept. of Health and children, Government of Ireland (2012)

- Acknowledges a natural caring role within the family:

*'Relatives.... given the nature of their relationship provide on-going care and support for each other throughout their lives'*

*'A carer is someone who is providing an ongoing significant level of care to a person who is in need of that care in the home due to illness or disability or frailty'*

# Impact of caring

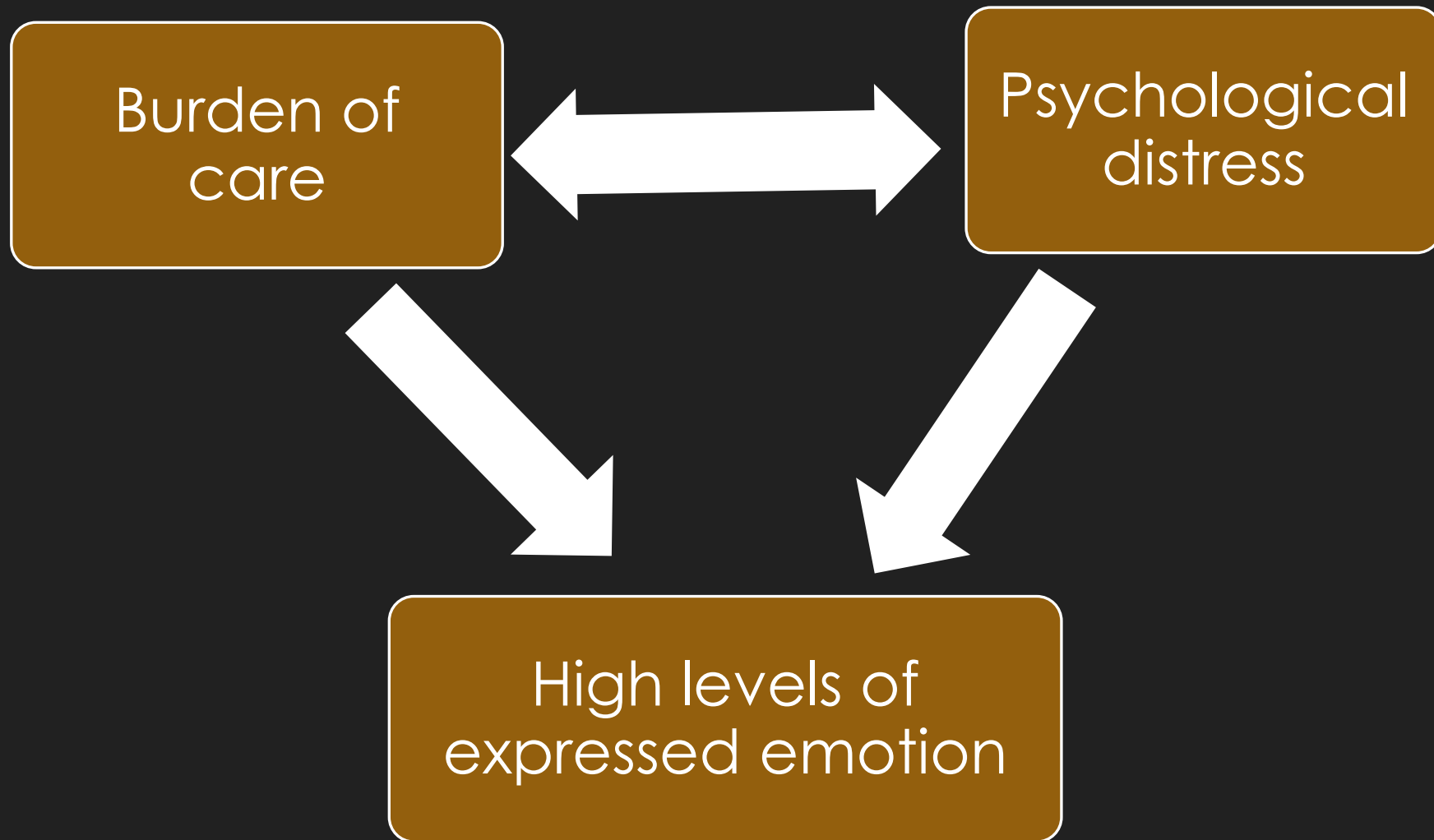
- Confusion over causes and contributing factors and underlying mechanisms of illness (self blame)
- Negative emotions from sadness and fear to anger and hostility
- Demands of the illness impact on carer's ability to attend to and maintain family and social relationships (Highet et al 2006)
- Carer and family accommodating the symptoms of illness, difficulty with boundary setting (resentment with siblings)
- Overdependence and unreasonable demands on carer
- Effects on mental and physical health of family members (Whitney et al 2007)

**‘Caring for someone with AN is an exhausting,  
protracted task, and it often stretches the coping  
resources of parents to the limit’  
(Treasure et al., 2005, p.162)**



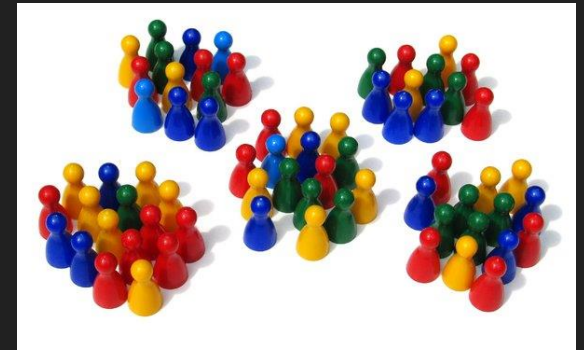
# Caring responses

- Focusing on their own interests
- Showing hope & optimism
- Seeking social support
- Externalising the illness
- Becoming informed
- Negative appraisal of the illness linked to hostility and criticism
- Overprotectiveness
- Accommodating the illness
- High emotional response to behaviours



# Unmet needs

Unmet or partially met needs in 90.6% family members (Grapp et al 2008)



Practical advice and guidance  
Need for information  
The need to talk to others about their experiences  
Psychoeducational groups

# The Four National Goals for Carers

## Government of Ireland (2012)

- 1. Recognise the value and contribution of carers and promote their inclusion in decisions relating to the person that they are caring for
- 2. Support carers to manage their physical, mental and emotional health and well-being
- 3. Support carers to care with confidence through the provision of adequate information, training, services and supports
- 4. Empower carers to participate as fully as possible in economic and social life



# What impacts a carers ability to cope?

## Carer

Role strain

Beliefs about the illness

Accommodation of the symptoms

Unmet needs

## Person with an ED

Eating Disorder  
Behaviours

Unwillingness to accept  
the 'sick role'

## Coping with the carer role

Stress

Anxiety

Depression

Emotions

Carer burnout and stress

# Impact

- Eating Disorders impact all family members, which in turn can lead to all family members experiencing a wide range of emotions.
- Helping family members reflect on their own emotional experiences can be beneficial
- Different emotional experiences can impact a carers ability to support the person with the eating disorder as well as care for themselves.
- Emotional experiences can impact peoples ability in communication, boundary setting, goal setting and making changes.

# Common areas of support required for families

- Psychoeducation/ externalisation of the illness
- Families caring styles and the Impact of an Eating Disorder on family relationships
- Communication in the home
- Families readiness for change in their own coping styles and behaviours
- Self care
- Accessing treatment and support

# Psychoeducation

- Explaining the role and function of an eating disorder
- Risks of eating disorder
- Evidence Based Treatment – CBT-E, MANTRA (Maudsley Model of Anorexia Nervosa Treatment for Adults), Family Therapy, SSCM (Specialist Supportive Clinical Management), FBT (Adolescents).
- Recovery from an Eating Disorder
- Holding hope for loved ones.
- Examining family members caring styles.



# Caring Styles:

Animal metaphors can be useful way of warning ourselves when are reacting in an extreme or unhelpful way (Janet Treasure)



Jellyfish

High levels of self blame produce a jellyfish response. This sensitive, often tearful reaction may additionally be due to exhaustion and despair. It becomes difficult to separate the illness from the person. You become overtly distressed, depressed, anxious, irritable and angry. The 'sad and mad' approach causes tears, anger and sleeplessness nights and worsens how everybody feels by raising high anxiety



Ostrich

Rather than confronting the difficult behaviour, the ostrich finds it difficult to cope with the distress of challenging and confronting the ED behaviour and so avoids talking and thinking about the problems at all. The downside is that the sufferer may misinterpret this approach as uncaring and feel unloved, thus strengthening low self esteem



Rhinoceros

Feeling too responsible for taking control of change, the rhino attempts to persuade and convince by argument and confrontation. The downside is that even if the sufferer does obey, confidence to continue to do so without assistance will not be developed. More likely, arguing back with ED logic will merely produce a deeper hole for the sufferer to hide in



## Kangaroo

The kangaroo does everything to protect. You treat the sufferer with kid gloves, burying them in their pouch in an effort to avoid any upset or stress, accommodating to all possible demands. The downside if this type of caring is that the sufferer fails to learn how to approach and master life's challenges and becomes trapped in the role of the eternal infant



## Dolphin

The dolphin uses a warm, friendly, hands off approach, subtly steering, looking for compromise and guiding gently into safety. Sometimes the dolphin may swim ahead, leading the way and guiding the passage, at other times swim alongside, coaching and giving encouragement and at times when person suffering with an ED is making positive progress, quietly swim behind

# Communication

- In times of distress within relationships, communication styles can impact how a message is received/perceived.
- Clear communication can assist families in reducing conflict and can help families become more confident in approaching difficult conversations.
- In working with families of Ed suffers, it is helpful to explore listening skills, nonverbal communication, assertive communication, reflective communication skills and communication styles.



# Communication continued

- In many households, family rules may have been disrupted due to illness. In order to cope with the demands of the illness, these boundaries/rules need to be re-established or new/adapted rules/boundaries need to be established and agreed.
- When implementing new rules or enforcing old rules it is important that an eating disorder can be a long term illness and the rules that are decided on as a family are practical for all family members.
- All family members need boundaries, not just the person with the Eating Disorder!!
- It is important to involve all members in a discussion when deciding what an acceptable and unacceptable boundary is.



# Helpful Resources

# Bodywhys.ie

The eating disorders association of ireland



01 210 7906



alex@bodywhys.ie



## SUPPORT SERVICES



HELPLINE: (01)  
2107906



EMAIL SUPPORT



ONLINE SUPPORT  
GROUP:  
BODYWHYSCONN  
ECT 19+



ONLINE SUPPORT  
GROUP:  
YOUTHCONNECT  
13-18



FREE PILAR  
PROGRAMME FOR  
FAMILIES



VIRTUAL SUPPORT  
GROUPS (18+)

Call our National Helpline on **01-2107906** or email **alex@bodywhys.ie**

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**BODYWHYS**  
The Eating Disorders Association of Ireland

[ABOUT EATING DISORDERS](#) [BODY IMAGE RESOURCES](#) [I NEED HELP](#) [SUPPORTING SOMEONE](#) [RECOVERY & TREATMENT](#) [FOR PROFESSIONALS](#) [UPCOMING EVENTS](#) [MEDIA & RESEARCH](#)

[For Professionals](#)

**FOR PROFESSIONALS**

This section focuses on resources for professionals. Some of it is our own material developed for specific professional groups, such as clinicians and schools and the archive information includes links to slides from presentations at conferences (including recordings from Eating Disorders Awareness Week activities or other webinars). This section contains:

- [Clinical Resources](#)
- [Conference Presentations - Archive](#)
- [A Resource for Dentists](#)
- [Resources for General Practitioners \(GPs\)](#)

**CLINICAL RESOURCES**

- CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS
- A RESOURCE FOR DENTISTS
- A RESOURCE FOR GENERAL PRACTITIONERS (GPs)
- A RESOURCE FOR PHARMACISTS
- SCHOOL SUPPORTS

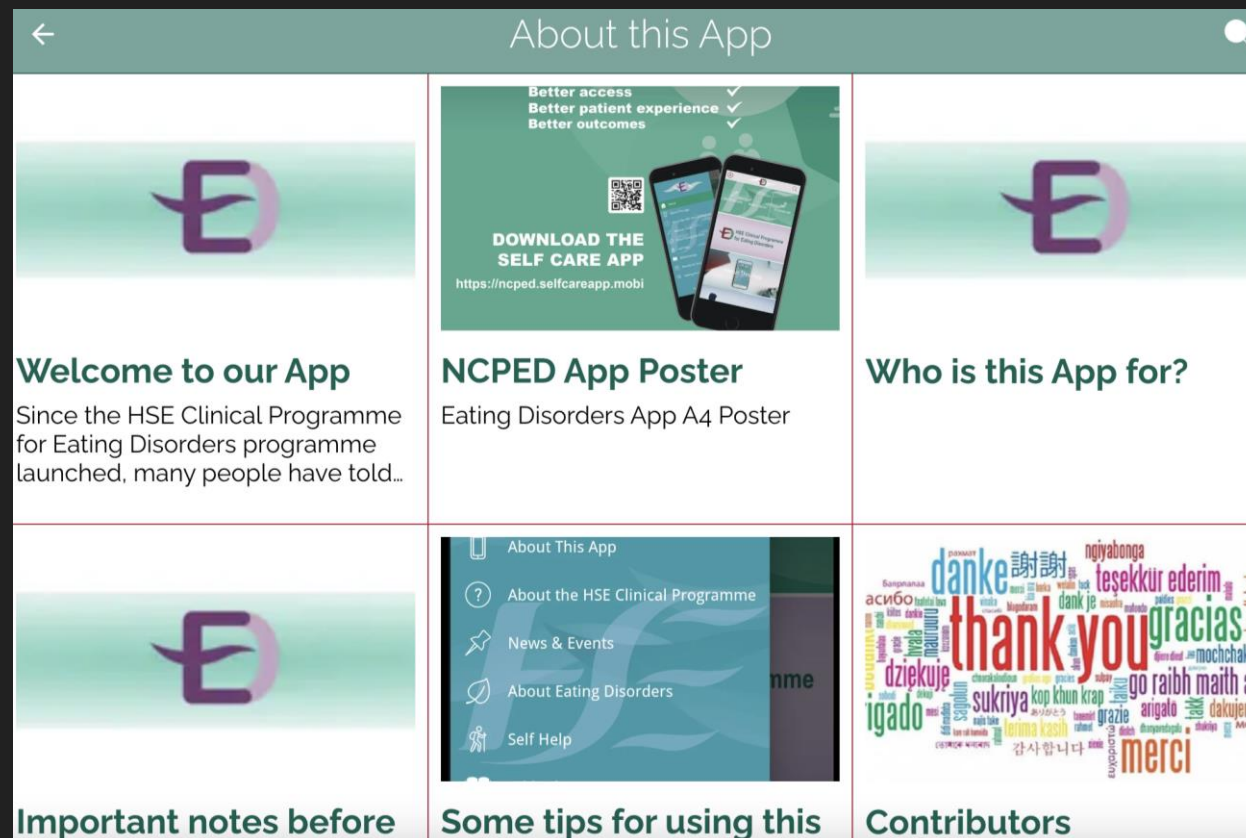
**LINKS**

- RESOURCE FOR DENTISTS
- RESOURCES FOR GPs
- RESOURCE FOR PHARMACISTS
- SECONDARY SCHOOLS: FIGURE RESOURCE
- SECONDARY SCHOOLS: SPHE RESOURCE
- SCHOOL TALKS & RESOURCES
- TRAINING PORTAL FOR TEACHERS

[Privacy - Terms](#)

<https://www.bodywhys.ie/for-professionals/lists>

## NCPED (national clinical programme for eating disorders)



# Bibliotherapy

books, online supports and blogs

- <https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/cspd/ncps/mental-health/eating-disorders/resources/a-guide-to-bibliotherapy-for-eating-disorders.pdf>

## HSE National Clinical Programme for Eating Disorders – Self Help Books and websites

**A Guide to Bibliotherapy for Eating Disorders – help for Patients, Families, Friends and Carers**

