

Coaching the Whole-Person Athlete: A Game Plan for Preventing Disordered Eating and Nourishing Healthy Body Image on Your Team



- 30.03% of girls and 16.98% of boys ages 6 to 18 exhibit disordered eating behaviors¹
- By age 40, 1 in 5 women and 1 in 7 men will experience an eating disorder²
- 23% to 79.5% of female athletes and 15% to 70% of male athletes are not eating enough to meet their bodies' needs³
- *Runners are a high-risk population for disordered eating and eating disorders*⁴

We can all help build a new culture of sport and fitness that nurtures healthy relationships with food, body, and movement.

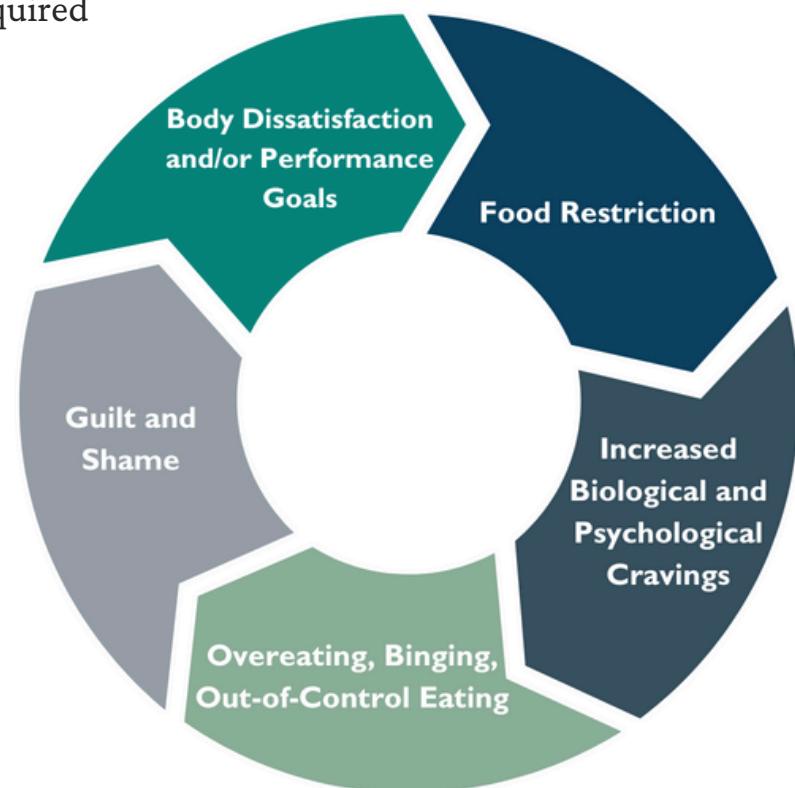
- Diet culture tells us that health, fitness, performance, and worth look a certain way – and that we should spend our time, energy, money, and focus trying to attain this.
- Disordered/disconnected eating is when external rules override how your body is feeling, or experiencing shame, guilt, anxiety, and fear around food.
- Cultural scripts around food, body, and sport keep us stuck in a race we cannot win.

“Not only are [female athletes] subjected to the cultural forces that associate Western beauty standards with personal worth, [but] there is an even tighter standard within sports: an ideal weight, an ideal body shape, one that almost nobody achieves without harming themselves.”

– Lauren Fleshman, *Good for a Girl: A Woman Running in a Man's World*

Signs your athlete may not be eating enough and/or needs further support:

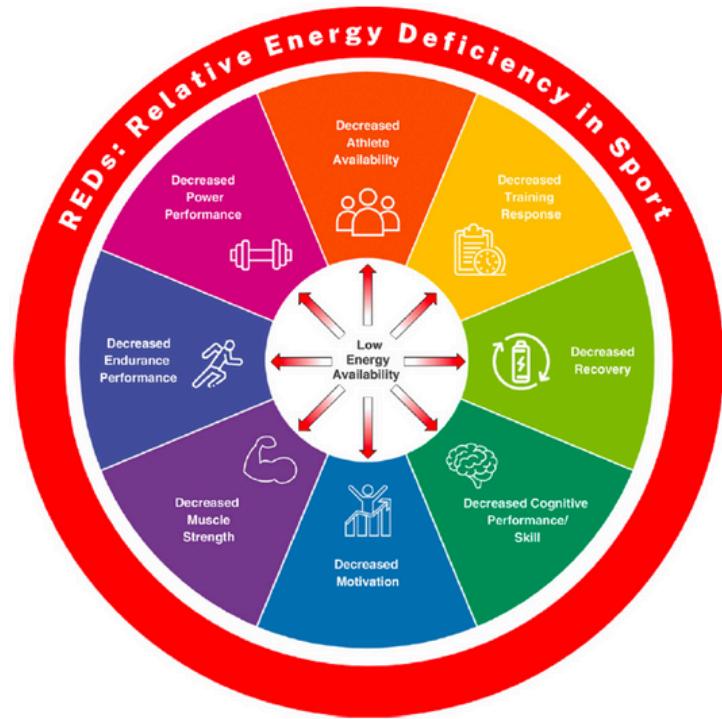
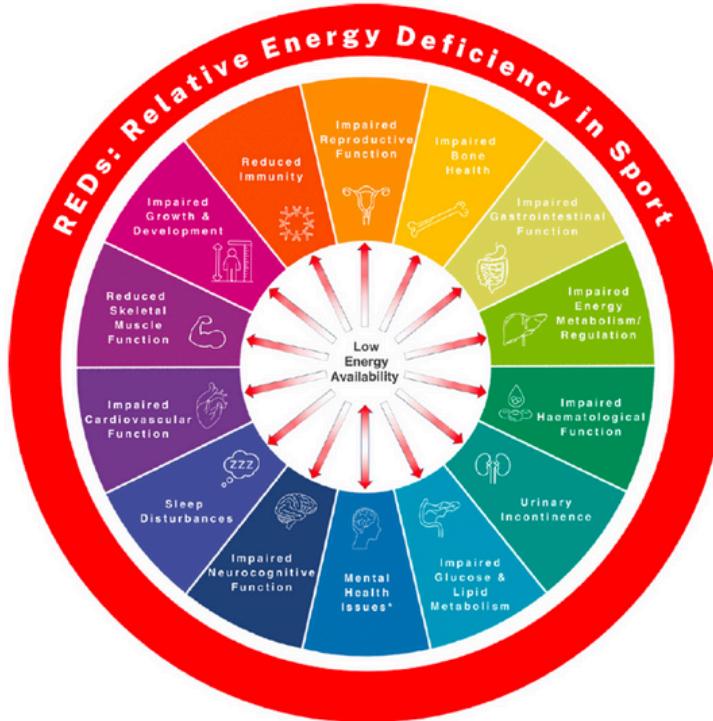
- Training above and beyond what is required
- Uncomfortable eating around others
- Counting calories, macros, grams, etc.
- Dieting or “clean eating”
- Body checking or comparisons
- Perfectionism and rigidity
- Frequent injuries



Even if everyone ate and exercised exactly the same, we would still be different weights, shapes, and sizes.

Note that exercise can interfere with hunger signals!

Relative Energy Deficiency in Sport (REDs)³



Message to our athletes:

Your body is on your team and worthy of your trust.

- Disordered/disconnected eating is about thoughts and behaviors, not body type or weight. You cannot assess an athlete's relationship with food, body, or sport by looking at them.
- Young women typically grow around 10 inches and gain 40 – 50 pounds during puberty, which often coincides with a dip or plateau in performance. Encourage them to nourish their bodies with patience and self-compassion.
- A missing period is never normal for a female athlete.
- Encourage your athletes to appreciate what their bodies can *do*, and remind them that weight does not equal performance.
- Be aware of language – no body criticisms or compliments.
- Encourage a social media “cleanse” – unfollow accounts that diminish self-worth.
- Focus on satisfaction and enough-ness in eating.
- Incorporate rest and self-care.
- Be patient, gentle, and curious!
- Your voice is powerful – use it!

Citations

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2. Ward, Z. J., Rodriguez, P., Wright, D. R., Austin, S. B., & Long, M. W. (2019). Estimation of eating disorders prevalence by age and associations with mortality in a simulated nationally representative US cohort. *JAMA Network Open*, 2(10). <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2019.12925>
3. Mountjoy, M., Ackerman, K. E., Bailey, D. M., Burke, L. M., Constantini, N., Hackney, A. C., Heikura, I. A., Melin, A., Pensgaard, A. M., Stellingwerff, T., Sundgot-Borgen, J. K., Torstveit, M. K., Jacobsen, A. U., Verhagen, E., Budgett, R., Engebretsen, L., & Erdener, U. (2023). 2023 International Olympic Committee's (IOC) Consensus Statement on Relative Energy Deficiency in Sport (REDs). *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 57(17), 1073–1098. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2023-106994>
4. Mancine RP, Gusfa DW, Moshrefi A, Kennedy SF. Prevalence of disordered eating in athletes categorized by emphasis on leanness and activity type – a systematic review. *J Eat Disord*. 2020;8(1):47. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40337-020-00323-2>