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Finding Eating Disorder Support Online

Four Supportive and Educational Web Sites

By **Christine Tetreault**

Eating disorders are serious medical and emotional illnesses, and those struggling with anorexia, bulimia, binge eating, or general disordered eating are encouraged to seek regular, ongoing professional treatment from expert caregivers. The eating disorder treatment team most often includes a therapist and a medical doctor, and possibly a psychiatrist and nutritionist as well. Eating disorder clients typically have regularly scheduled appointments, but often only see their providers in person at most weekly, and often less frequently, depending on the severity of their specific illness and symptoms. In between private appointments with professional health providers, individuals may attend a support group or a day or evening treatment program.

Progress toward wellness can be time-consuming and requires tremendous follow-through and commitment. Even with these many scheduled and structured professional supports, individuals working to recover from eating disorders may still need -- and want -- to reach out and connect, when they are feeling especially at-risk, to know that they are not alone and isolated in their medical and emotional struggle. Fortunately, reliable and educational support is available from many valuable and well-monitored eating disorder recovery web sites. This article reviews four of the major online eating disorder support and education web sites. These sites are monitored and/or endorsed by professional treatment providers. Readers can be confident that the site content is researched and is maintained by the organizations affiliated with each of the sites.

<http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org> The National Eating Disorders Association, also known as NEDA, is the largest eating disorder nonprofit in the U.S. NEDA posts eating disorder news and medical and mental health information on its site, publishes (and distributes) educational materials, and also offers a toll-free support and therapy referral hotline at 1-800-931-2237. The NEDA site provides descriptions of types of eating disorders and links to local resources, for those just starting the recovery journey and looking for treatment providers. NEDA's newest online features include Ask An Expert and Voices of Hope, designed to provide timely professional answers, guidance, and support on eating disorder issues. ReconnectingU, a student assistance program, provides 24-hour support for college students. Be sure to check the NEDA site for local resources in your area. In Massachusetts, for example, MEDA, based in Newton, MA, is closely associated with NEDA, and offers treatment referrals and weekly support groups (www.medainc.org).

<http://www.anad.org/site/anadweb/> - ANAD is the national organization for Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders. ANAD runs a hotline at 847-831-3438 and also coordinates annual eating disorder Candlelight Vigils run by volunteers across the country, in memory of loved ones lost to eating disorders and in hope for those working toward recovery. ANAD's site includes general medical and mental health information on eating disorders, message boards, treatment resources, and advocacy updates. ANAD also lists volunteer-run support groups, organized based on ANAD group guidelines and assistance. Be sure to check their site for an ANAD group near you, or to review the different type of therapy approaches available for eating disorder treatment. Also visit their Healthy Body Image Pledge Page and read about the simple ways we can all help spread the positive body image message, day to day, through the magazines and products we purchase, and through non-diet, non-body-focused conversation and compliments.

<http://www.myselfhelp.com> - MySelf-Help.com is among the newer online sites to offer professional eating disorder support, education, and self-help treatment information. Unlike the other web sites listed in this article, myselfhelp.com is a subscription site, meaning that users must subscribe to the site to take advantage of the helpful features. The site explains that MySelfHelp.com was developed by therapists and other professionals to be used in conjunction with therapy. Based in Northborough, MA, MySelfHelp.com's monthly membership fee of \$20, includes access to all of its programs and moderated discussion forums. In addition to eating disorders, the site also offers programs for depression, anxiety, insomnia, HIV-related issues, and obsessive shopping.

<http://www.something-fishy.org/> - The creative name for the SomethingFishy web site, now in its tenth year, comes from the eating disorder community's suggestion that eating disorder clients (and the general public) take a giant step toward avoiding weight obsession by getting rid of the scales that record and highlight those ominous pounds and ounces. Taken one step further, SomethingFish pronounces that -- scales are fish, not for people. The site offers extremely popular chat rooms and posting areas for those suffering from eating disorders and for parents, family, and friends eager to learn more about the illness and about treatment and support. Special Somethingfishy.org features include a monthly poll, news, exceptional summaries on medical research, treatment, and symptoms, advocacy updates, a list of recovery tools, personal stories and expressive art and poetry,

Takeaways

- Online sites should only be used in addition to regular appointments with professional caregivers.
- These sites include hotlines and are monitored and endorsed by professional treatment associations.
- Myselfhelp.com also offers help for anxiety, obsessive shopping, depression, and insomnia.

along with a Memorial Wall (virtual) for those needing to remember loved ones lost to eating disorders. Ownership and responsibility for monitoring the Somethingfishy web site recently passed to CRC Health (<http://www.crchealth.com/>), which also owns the Sierra Tuscon treatment center and several related health web sites.

Again, remember that online web sites are recommended as additional support only and are never intended to replace professional in-person therapeutic and medical care. Those in professional treatment should also be sure to share their online support visits, questions, and experiences with their treatment team.

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