



# Nutrition Restoration in Eating Disorder Healing

Meredith Starr RD, LDN  
Director of Nutrition Services  
September 24th 2024

# Presentation Learning Objectives

- Define physical signs and symptoms associated with inadequate nutrition and eating disorder behaviors
- Understand the importance of weight and nutrition restoration
- Improve how to discuss and understand discussing weight with someone healing from an eating disorder



# What is Malnutrition?

## Academy/ASPEN malnutrition criteria 10

Indicator	Chronic illness				Acute illness			
	Moderate		Severe		Moderate		Severe	
Energy intake	< 75% of energy needs for > 7 days		≤ 50% of energy needs for ≥ 5 days		< 75% of energy needs for ≥ 1 month		≤ 75% of energy needs for ≥ 1 month	
Weight loss	1-2%	1 week	> 2%	1 week	5%	1 month	> 5%	1 month
	5%	1 month	> 5%	1 month	7.5%	3 months	> 7.5%	3 months
	7.5%	3 months	> 7.5%	3 months	10%	6 months	> 10%	6 months
					20%	1 year	>20%	1 year
Loss of subcutaneous fat	Mild		Moderate		Mild		Severe	
Muscle mass	Mild		Moderate		Mild		Severe	
Fluid accumulation	Mild		Moderate to severe		Mild		Severe	
Grip strength	N/A		Measurably reduced		N/A		Measurably reduced	



# Adding Context

Under these guidelines\*, malnutrition in a 25 year old 5'6"  
150lb lightly active female would be

## Moderate

<1500 calorie intake for >7 days

1.5-3 lb weight loss in 1 week

7.5 lb weight loss in 1 month

## Severe

<1000 calorie intake for >5 days

>3 lb weight loss in 1 week

>7.5 lb weight loss in 1 month

\*Malnutrition guidelines are NOT used to diagnose eating disorders



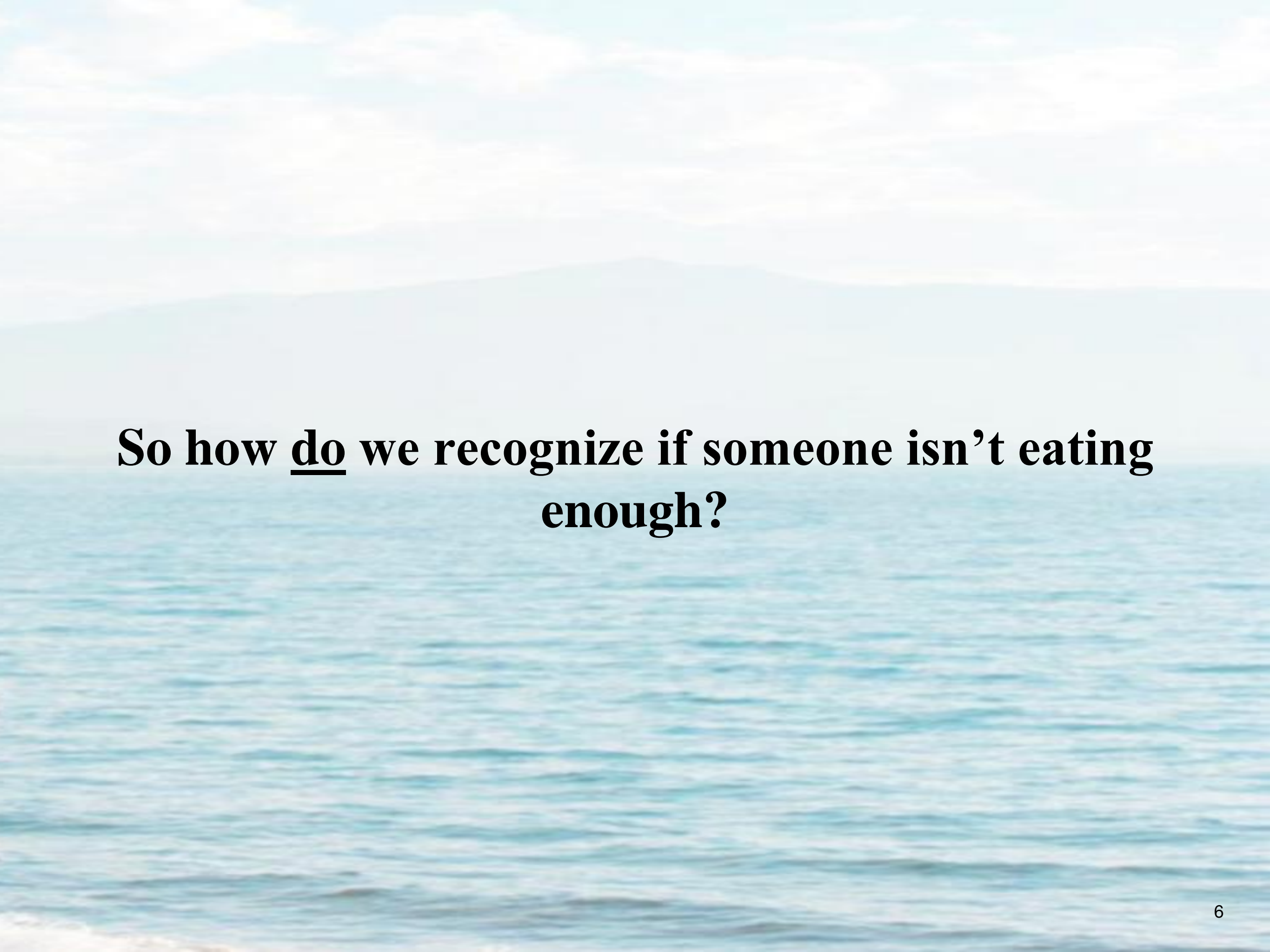
# Malnutrition

Does that seem like extreme starvation or weight loss?  
Probably not!

“Normal” dieting and weight loss behaviors can actually be significant nutrition concerns.

The diet and marketing industries have successfully normalized weight loss as a “good thing.”

Even severe malnutrition and eating disorder behaviors may not lead to visible weight loss or “underweight” body weight.



**So how do we recognize if someone isn't eating  
enough?**

# Physical Signs of Inadequate Nutrition

Physical signs that someone may not be eating enough\*\*

- Weight loss
- Loss of menstrual cycle
- Abnormal blood pressure
- Low heart rate or pulse
- Abnormal lab values such as low blood sugar or electrolyte imbalance

\*\*If there is not another explanation



# Subjective Symptoms of Inadequate Nutrition

Subjective symptoms that someone may not be eating enough\*\*

- Chest pain or heaviness
- Shortness of breath
- Dizziness
- Fatigue
- Cognitive impairment (i.e. “brain fog,” inability to concentrate, difficulty with memory)
- Reduced health of hair, skin, and nails (i.e. hair loss, easy bruising, easily damaged skin)
- Digestive issues

\*\*If there is not another explanation







# Nutrition and Eating Disorder Behaviors

In addition to signs and symptoms of not eating enough, concerning eating behaviors include

- Reduction in portion size
- Skipping meals
- Not engaging in social eating or avoiding eating with others
- Any purging (i.e. vomiting, laxative abuse)
- Major changes in eating behaviors
- Avoiding or completely restricting certain foods or food groups
- Being very rigid and strict with food intake
- Feeling very anxious or upset if food does not go as planned
- Feeling the need to exercise to “burn off” food

# Nutrition Restoration

We need to get back what's been lost!

If someone isn't eating enough, they need to eat more to return to adequate.

*And then*, they need to eat more than that to heal the damage.

Someone healing from an eating disorder needs to eat more than person who hasn't been under nourished.

# Nutrition Restoration

Nutrition restoration is the process of eating enough to support and heal one's body.

Weight restoration is often a result of nutrition restoration.

Weight restoration is the healing and repairing of tissues and organs, not just gaining fat.

The amount of weight restoration needed depends on the individual person.

# How to Talk About Nutrition Restoration

Most people suffering from eating disorders will be anxious or afraid of nutrition restoration. We often hear things like:

“If I gain weight, I will hate the way I look”

“I’m happier now that I lost weight”

“Eating more will make me feel so guilty”

“I’m so much more comfortable at a lower weight”

“Everyone is going to judge me if I starting eating more”



# How to Talk About Nutrition Restoration

**“If I gain weight, I will hate the way I look”**

DO: Affirm that uncertainty is difficult. “We don’t know what exactly your body will do and that’s really scary!”

DO: Encourage that they can be okay no matter what happens. Body changes don’t have to be bad or scary. Any change probably won’t be as bad as we think.

DON’T: Tell them they won’t gain “too much weight.” We don’t know exactly what their body needs, so don’t know what “too much” is or isn’t.





## **How to Talk About Nutrition Restoration**

**“I’m happier now that I lost weight”**

**DO:** Acknowledge that emotions are complex. We are never only happy or only sad regardless of our weight.

**DON’T:** Only talk about weight loss as a positive. This is how we start building associations that weight loss = good = happy.

# How to Talk About Nutrition Restoration

**“Eating more will make me feel so guilty”**

DO: Remember that it’s our relationship with food and how much we think we should eat that makes us feel guilty.

DO: Remember that food is not moral, no matter how much we eat!

DON’T: View avoiding eating too much as the solution to not feeling guilty. This leads to more restraint and avoidance of eating.





## **How to Talk About Nutrition Restoration**

**“I’m so much more comfortable at a lower weight”**

**DO:** Validate that we are all trained to see smaller bodies and losing weight as desirable. It makes sense to feel accomplished for losing weight.

**DON’T:** View nourishment and comfort as a trade off. We can’t really be comfortable if we are not meeting our body’s basic needs.



# How to Talk About Nutrition Restoration

**“Everyone is going to judge me if I starting eating more”**

DO: Remember that most people aren't observing us that closely.

DO: Understand that our fears of judgement are our own insecurities being projected.

DO: Choose to think that most people are kind and not judgemental

DON'T: Focus only on negative experiences



# Summary

Eating disorder behaviors and not getting enough nutrition can be difficult to recognize

Undernutrition can lead to very serious health impacts

We often see weight loss and eating less as positives and ignore the dangers

It is critical to restore all lost nutrition by eating more than is comfortable until the body is fully healed

It is emotionally difficult to restore nutrition and requires professional and





QUESTIONS?