

As Caring Professionals, Remember to Care for Ourselves



AS NUTRITION AND DIETETICS professionals who care for the health of others, are we doing enough to care for our own health—physical, emotional, and mental?

Like so many of you, I was tremendously saddened by the recent deaths by suicide of two Academy members—both registered dietitian nutritionists (RDNs) and accomplished women who did so much for their clients, patients, and communities and who were beloved by their families, friends, and colleagues.

While we cannot know what may have led our fellow members to end their lives, we can look for warning signs of mental health concerns in ourselves, and in those within and aspiring to our profession. And we must take advantage of resources providing treatment and support.

STAY AWARE

“As dietetics professionals, we aim to serve and take care of others, often-times at the expense of ourselves,” says Academy member Jennifer E. Costello, LCSW, RD, LDN, a private-practice psychotherapist in Oak Park, IL.

“It is important for dietitians to stay aware of our physical and emotional health as well as create a support system for ourselves. We cannot give what we do not have, so attending to one’s emotional health is key,” Costello says.

“I recommend RDNs meet with a therapist if feelings of isolation, self-harm, depression, and anxiety start to show up,” says Academy member Julia Cassidy, MS, RDN, CEDRD-S, director of dietary services for the adolescent eating disorder and mental health programs at the Center for Discovery in Los Alamitos, CA, and the Mental Health Resource Professional for the Behavioral Health Nutrition dietetic practice group (DPG).

RISK FACTORS

Costello adds that RDNs are as susceptible as anyone to mental health

risk factors that affect many: a relative with a mental illness, stressful life situations, medical conditions, traumatic experiences or abuse, and substance abuse, among others.

Some symptoms of depression and anxiety include low mood; low energy, lack of interest in things once found pleasurable, change in sleep patterns, change in eating patterns, lack of motivation, apathy, excessive worry, isolation, and difficulty thinking and focusing.

“When these symptoms intensify and impact one’s ability to function, then treatment is indicated and beneficial. Dietitians, who are often hard workers and caregivers, must take these symptoms seriously and seek support and help,” Costello says.

Costello and Cassidy say there is a lack of evidence that RDNs are at greater risk for mental health issues than are other health professionals. “We are usually ‘helpers’ by nature and want the best for our clients,” Cassidy says.

She adds that RDNs who work with people who have eating disorders “hear a staggering amount of personal trauma histories from our clients. This can take a toll on our mental well-being.”

“And if the RDN has her own psychological issues—anxiety, depression, history of trauma—the stress can be compounded. Research suggests multiple linking causes such as genetics, environment, and lifestyle influence whether someone develops a mental health condition. We also cannot ignore that biochemical processes, circuits, and basic brain structure may play a role, too,” Cassidy says.

RESOURCES

I asked our behavioral health nutrition experts to identify resources where RDNs can turn for help with mental health issues—our clients’ and our own. Their recommendations include:



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- Behavioral Health Nutrition DPG: www.bhndpg.org
- National Alliance on Mental Illness: www.nami.org
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 800/273-TALK
- Mental Health America: www.mentalhealthamerica.net.

The Academy is planning two anchor sessions at the 2019 Food & Nutrition Conference & Expo (FNCE) that will address behavioral health issues: “Disordered Eating, Eating Disorders, and Orthorexia” and “RDN/Healthcare Professional Burnout, Depression/Mental Health, and Suicide Prevention.” More information will be available on the Academy’s website as FNCE approaches.

OPEN A DIALOGUE

Please remember: As RDNs, we care for others, *and* we must care for ourselves.

“Stay cognizant of your mood and behaviors,” Costello says. “Opening dialogue with those you care about can help you and them. There is no shame or blame in struggling with these issues and seeking support in ways that feel best for you.”

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