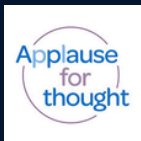




SAFE SCHOOL

GUIDELINES
(ED INFORMED)

WWW.IRISCLINIC.CO.UK



INTRODUCTION

Who are we?

Iris Clinic UK is the only Spotlight-registered service specialising in eating disorder support for the performing arts industry.

We provide specialist one-to-one support for performers experiencing eating disorders, disordered eating, body image concerns and self worth challenges. Alongside our clinical services, we deliver CPD training to performing arts teachers and faculty members across the UK, helping educators recognise risk factors, promote wellbeing, and support students effectively.

As leaders in this field, we also drive research focused on the prevention of eating disorders within dance and drama schools, working to create safer, healthier environments for the next generation of performers.

Some sobering facts- 1 in 3 dancers will develop an eating disorder in their career. Dancers have 3x higher risk than the general public of suffering from an eating disorder. 1 in 2 dancers do not meet their energy needs. Dancers may have to wait more than 3 months for NHS treatment providing they fit the criteria. Anorexia has the highest mortality rate of any mental health illness.

Iris Clinic UK is the first specialist clinic of its kind in the UK, created to address the uniquely complex challenges surrounding eating disorders, disordered eating, and body image within the performing arts industry.

Performers in training and throughout their professional careers face distinct pressures that can increase vulnerability to eating disorders. Our work is dedicated to providing specialist support, education, and prevention strategies tailored specifically to these environments.

This introductory guide has been developed to help you take the first steps towards creating a safer, more supportive environment for the students and young people in your care. Our role is not to "fix" individuals, but to reduce the risk factors that can contribute to the development of eating disorders and to foster cultures that prioritise wellbeing alongside performance.

Whether you are an agent, teacher, dance school owner, faculty member, personal trainer, parent, or carer, this resource is designed to provide practical guidance, knowledge, and confidence to support those who may be struggling with disordered eating, body image concerns, or an eating disorder.

Creating meaningful change within the performing arts requires a collective effort. We cannot do this work alone, and we invite you to join us in building safer, healthier environments for current and future generations of performers.

➡ In a recent 2026 survey, conducted by Iris Clinic UK, based off of 90 respondents who chose to engage in the survey- 95.5% of people said that they observed other individuals in the industry struggle with eating disorders or disordered eating?

INTRODUCTION

DE- Disordered Eating- This refers to a wide range of unhealthy eating habits or attitudes toward food that don't necessarily meet the criteria for a clinical eating disorder.

ED- Eating Disorder- These are clinically diagnosable mental health conditions. They involve more severe, persistent patterns of disordered eating behaviours, often with physical and psychological consequences.

Your Role: Interception vs. Escalation

You are not expected to be a therapist - but you can be a protector of your dancers' physical and emotional well-being. Many EDs begin with seemingly minor habits. Catching these early, without judgment, can interrupt the path toward more harmful behaviours.

Early interception might look like:

- Creating a safe, body-neutral environment in your studio
- Limiting mirror use or removing unnecessary visual triggers
- Using inclusive, non-body-focused language
- Encouraging rest and nourishment as vital to performance
- Being open to checking in privately (avoiding commenting on body see page 10) when you notice concerning patterns.

*EDs and DE can affect dancers of any size, shape, background, or gender. Assumptions based on appearance alone may overlook those most in need of support.



CHAPTER ONE

HOW TO SPOT AN EATING DISORDER

HOW TO SPOT AN EATING DISORDER

Eating disorders/disordered eating can thrive off of secrecy and lies. Our duty of care is to know the secret/lesser known warning signs and symptoms off by heart so that we can then help support our students/clients to recovery.

Signs of disordered eating and body image issues can manifest in various ways. Here's a more detailed exploration of each sign:

- Eating foods with low calorie labels: Individuals may become fixated on the nutritional labels of food, often gravitating towards products marketed as "low-calorie." This behaviour can stem from a desire to control caloric intake, often leading to an unhealthy relationship with food. It may suggest an obsession with weight loss and a fear of gaining weight.
- Avoiding food groups: This sign indicates a potential restriction of certain food categories, such as carbohydrates, fats, or sugars. Such avoidance may be driven by misconceptions about nutrition or an extreme desire to lose weight. This can result in nutritional deficiencies and an unhealthy focus on food choices.
- Body checking in studio mirrors: Regularly scrutinising one's appearance in mirrors, especially in a dance or fitness context, can reflect body dissatisfaction. This behaviour may involve checking for perceived flaws, leading to a distorted self-image and perpetuating anxiety about one's weight and shape.
- Covering up/Change of dress sense: A noticeable shift in clothing choices, such as wearing baggier or more concealing outfits, can indicate discomfort with one's body. This behaviour may arise from a desire to hide perceived flaws or a significant change in body weight, reflecting a struggle with body acceptance.
- Loss of 'spark'/appears visibly distant: A decline in enthusiasm or emotional engagement can signal underlying issues related to mental health or self-esteem. Individuals may become withdrawn or less interested in activities they once enjoyed, suggesting that their preoccupation with body image or eating is overshadowing their overall well-being.

HOW TO SPOT AN EATING DISORDER (CONTINUED)

- Toilet trips (could be a sign of vomiting or laxative abuse): Increased frequency of trips to the bathroom after meals may suggest attempts to purge food through vomiting or misuse of laxatives. This behaviour is often a coping mechanism for guilt associated with eating and can have severe health consequences.
- Clean eating: While eating healthily is important, an extreme focus on "clean eating" can become problematic. This may involve strict adherence to unprocessed foods and avoidance of anything deemed unhealthy, leading to a rigid mindset and potential social isolation due to food-related restrictions.
- Dramatic weight gain/loss: Significant fluctuations in weight can be a visible indicator of disordered eating patterns. Rapid changes may reflect cycles of restriction and bingeing, or other unhealthy behaviours, signalling a need for intervention and support.
- Excessive caffeine consumption: Relying on caffeine to suppress appetite or boost energy levels can be a red flag. This behaviour might indicate attempts to manage weight or cope with fatigue, often leading to negative physical and mental health effects.
- Excessive water consumption: An obsession with hydration can also be a sign of disordered behaviours, potentially linked to attempts to control weight. This can lead to dangerous over-hydration, distorting the balance of electrolytes in the body.
- Pushing past injury and not resting appropriately: Ignoring physical pain or injuries in pursuit of fitness goals can indicate an unhealthy relationship with exercise. This behaviour often reflects a mindset where performance and appearance are prioritised over health and well-being, risking further injury and long-term damage.
- Recognising these signs is crucial for early intervention and support, fostering a healthier relationship with food and body image.

HOW TO SPOT AN EATING DISORDER (CONTINUED)

Common symptoms of DE/ED include:

- Micro-dieting or “banking” calories
- Skipping meals or obsessively restricting intake
- Over-exercising to “compensate” for food
- Bingeing
- Purging
- Laxative abuse
- Orthorexic behaviour (obsession with “clean” or “healthy” eating)
- Secret eating or emotional eating
- Mimicking social media food trends (e.g., “What I Eat in a Day” videos)
- Tracking calories or macros obsessively
- Linking self-worth to food control or body shape
- Chronic dieting
- Exercise addiction
- Restriction of certain foods deemed 'bad'
- Guilt and/ or shame around food
- Anxiety around eating
- Feelings of having to 'earn' food
- Social withdrawal as a result of food fear
- Lack of self-trust around food
- Obsessive food focus and/ or calorie counting
- Extreme hunger
- Fear of gaining weight
- Fear of feeling full
- Lack of self-worth associated with body shape
- Loss of menstrual cycle
- Perfectionism
- Imposter syndrome
- Performance anxiety / stage fright
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Burnout
- Low self-esteem
- Identity confusion (self vs. performer persona)
- Isolation or lack of support



CHAPTER TWO

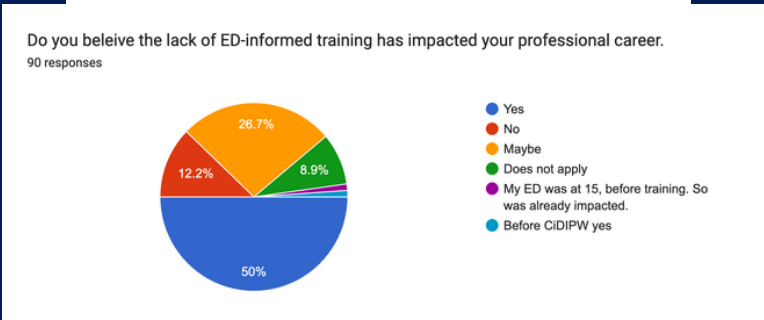
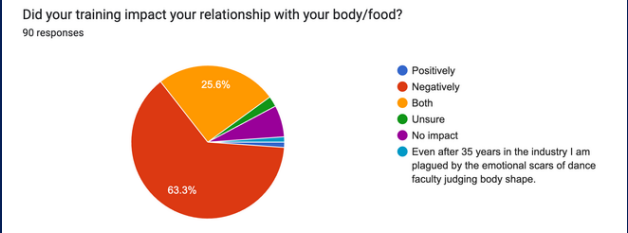
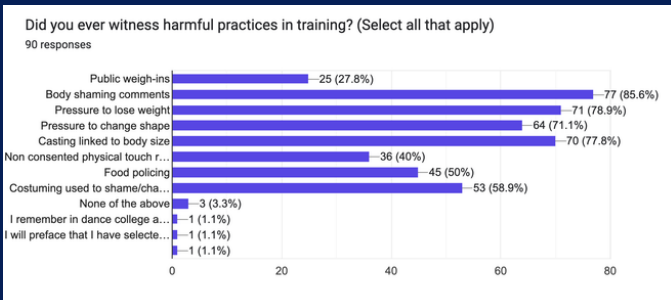
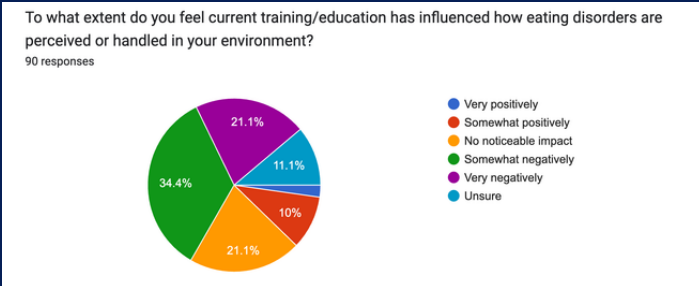
HOW TO HELP

THE ED SAFE SCHOOL GUIDELINES

Findings from a 2026 survey conducted by Iris Clinic UK suggest that training environments can play a significant role in shaping students' relationships with food, body image, and wellbeing.

Based on responses from 90 participants who voluntarily took part in the survey, the findings indicate that there is scope for strengthened safeguarding practices within some training settings. The research highlights the important influence that schools, studios, and training facilities can have on students' experiences and reinforces the need for proactive education, awareness, and support around eating disorders and disordered eating.

These findings underline the value of creating environments that prioritise both performance excellence and student wellbeing.



THE ED SAFE SCHOOL GUIDELINES

We asked-

What impact (if any) do you believe increased ED-informed training would have on wellbeing in the performance industry?

- “It would remove stigmas and re-educate teachers and students on how to spot signs and support people with eating disorders. A lot goes swept under the rug because educators aren’t sure of the signs or how to support students. A lot of teachers also don’t realise the impact of wording used and how seriously unfurling should be taken.”
- “It would be hugely impactful to have more education around ED’s and fuelling for training and performance”
- “It would change everything”
- “Increased ED-informed training would likely improve wellbeing in the performance industry by promoting healthier body standards, early identification of disordered eating, and more supportive environments. It could reduce stigma, prevent harm, and help performers feel safer and better supported.”
- “Catching it early is key. Teachers need to spot the early signs”
- “Helping teachers with identifying it early in students would be brilliant. Knowing how to approach suspected eating disorders in a professional manner with parents and students would be very beneficial too.”
- “Less triggering comments would be made as people would be more mindful on how their words are perceived. Buying/making costumes to fit bodies that you have taken measurements for, not asking for the measurements and still buying/making too small/large so the performer feels degraded.”
- “Performers may not continue to leave training with a degree in dance or musical theatre that is coupled with an eating disorder, entering the industry, in whatever capacity crippled, rather than a thriving performer. Dance training should NOT be damaging to a students’ physical or mental health.”
- “It would help remove stigma around the topic which in turn would encourage people to talk more openly and therefore support each other when faced with triggers or negative body image. Educating all in the industry would be beneficial, but particularly educating those in positions of power as this would prevent as many harmful comments being made and create an increased awareness of the topic across the industry.”

HOW TO HELP

Helping someone struggling with disordered eating is a delicate task and sometimes we feel as though it is our job to offer advice or 'fix it' however disordered eating has often developed over time and recovery takes time, patience and the correct approach to care. Quite often, in a bid to help, we can trigger someone even more. We must acknowledge our duty for intervention and onwards referral as opposed to personal advice and behavioural direction.



For Students with Visible Weight Loss...

Instead Of...	Try This...	Why This Approach is More Helpful.
'You look very skinny/slim/small/weak'	'It seems to me that you have lost your spark and some of your infectious energy.'	Commenting on someone's weight can sometimes affirm to them that their efforts are 'paying off'.
'You need to eat more'	'How would you feel about giving yourself a bit more energy for the day?'	Opening up the conversation allows the student to express potential fear or food and weight gain.
'You won't be able to succeed if you don't try harder to eat'	'I wonder if there something getting in the way of your ability to nourish yourself? Do you want to talk to me about it without any judgement?'	This often perpetuates shame and can cause a student to shut down rather than open up.
'You need to gain weight'	'Would you like to share with me any fears about perhaps gaining weight?'	Telling a student to gain weight is another way of commenting on their appearance. There will be many reasons as to why a student can't just 'gain weight' and these may need to be explored by a professional.

HOW TO HELP



What to Do vs What Not to Do.

Instead Of...	Try This...
Watching them eat or forcing them to eat.	Create safer environments for students to eat in, by allowing time for them to eat between classes and sit down whilst eating. Gently and supportively point them in the direction of professional support.
Preventing them from dancing.	This is a complex subject and does require a professional physical assessment. Preventing a student from dancing until they gain weight can sometimes make things worse. Consulting an ED professional and students' GP is appropriate in this circumstance.
Comparing them to their peers.	This can be harmful and may exacerbate disordered eating.
Telling their parents without their consent.	Where appropriate, always gain trust with the student and ask for their consent before breaching confidentiality.



THE SAFE SCHOOL CHECKLIST



The 'Safe School' Checklist.

Specialised Affiliated ED Counsellor	✓
Affiliated Physio	✓
Injury Mental Health Support	✓
Providing Enough Time to Sit Down, Eat and Let Food Settle.	✓
No Uniform in Dance Classes	✓
Timetabled Focussed Rest and Recovery Periods	✓
Eating Disorder Sensitive Nutrition Education	✓
Blind Casting	✓
Teacher Support + Education	✓

💬 Partner with Iris Clinic UK to help protect and support your students' wellbeing. Together, we can make your school a safer place by raising awareness of eating disorders and promoting early intervention. To affiliate your school, contact us at support@irisclinic.co.uk.

THE SAFE SCHOOL CHECKLIST

♦ Old School Teaching Styles

Traditional teaching methods sometimes involve harsh critique, public weigh-ins, or body shaming. Comments about weight, shape, or needing to "look better on stage" can plant seeds of body dissatisfaction or intensify existing struggles.

♦ Body Favouritism

Teachers or directors may unconsciously favour certain body types for casting or positioning in class. Repeatedly seeing only thin dancers featured in solos or front-row positions reinforces the harmful idea that thinness is required for opportunity or success.

♦ Uniforms and Dress Codes

Leotards and tights leave little to the imagination, highlighting every body change or difference. Without guidance, this environment can lead dancers to body-check obsessively or become hyper-aware of natural body changes, **particularly during puberty.**

♦ Scheduling and Rest

Demanding schedules can normalise ignoring hunger, skipping meals, or pushing through exhaustion. When dancers are praised for "working through pain," it can reinforce the idea that self-care and proper fuelling aren't priorities.

Note- Without realising it, we sometimes teach dancers to disconnect from their bodies during their crucial developmental years. This "push through" mentality is often reinforced through the language we use, aiming to build strong, resilient, and hardworking dancers. We think we're helping by encouraging a 'mind over matter' approach. However, this mindset – the idea of "no pain, no gain" or "don't give up no matter what" – can actually increase the risk of injury, dull dancers' awareness of important signals like hunger and fullness, and cause emotional disconnection, which may contribute to mental health challenges.

♦ Mirrors


Mirrors, meant to improve technique, can become tools for constant body scrutiny. Dancers may fixate on perceived flaws or begin to body-check compulsively, distorting how they see themselves and contributing to low self-esteem. Mirrors can intensify poor body image and body dysmorphia.

Learning Point- By taking time away from the mirrors in class, you subtly teach dancers to only use mirrors for technique checking and train them to feel their dance from the inside out.

♦ Emphasis on the Physical Body


Unlike other performing arts, dance is almost entirely visual and physical. Dancers receive feedback primarily on how they look and move, which can make it difficult to separate their self-worth from their appearance.

Learning Point- As dance teachers, we have the nuanced task of commenting on how a dancer might be dancing, without commenting on their weight/shape or anything that might be ambiguously interpreted as commenting on their weight and shape.

 Partner with Iris Clinic UK to help protect and support your students' wellbeing. Together, we can make your school a safer place by raising awareness of eating disorders and promoting early intervention. To affiliate your school, contact us at support@irisclinic.co.uk.

SIGNPOSTING

- Beat- Welcome to Helpfinder - HelpFinder
- The National Centre for Eating Disorders-[Find professional support.](#)
- Applause for Thought- Practitioner Directory – Applause for thought
- Spotlight UK Resources- <https://support.spotlight.com/hc/en-us/>
- Iris Clinic Uk- irisclinic.co.uk

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