

Anorexia and bulimia rates are on the rise, and spa professionals are sometimes the first to spot warning signs. Knowing how to detect them—and how to properly act when you do—can save lives and protect your business.

By **Heather Wood Rudolph**

DAYSPA INVESTIGATES

Hard to Swallow

SANDRA HAYNES KNEW APRIL* FOR ABOUT 18 YEARS BEFORE SHE TRIED TO SAVE HER LIFE.

“She became a client and friend,” says Haynes, co-owner of What’s New the Salon (www.whatsnewthesalon.com) in Murfreesboro, Tennessee.

But Haynes knew something else about April—she’d suffered from anorexia most of her adult life. “I knew for years. Everyone knew,” she says. “It was the giant elephant in the room.”

One day, Haynes decided that she couldn’t bear to watch her friend waste away any longer. “I thought, ‘What if I never say anything—what if nobody ever says anything—and she dies?’ I was prepared to lose her as a client, even as a friend. But I didn’t want her to lose her life,” she says.

On a slow business day, Haynes took April into a secluded room at the spa and closed the door. “I encouraged her to get the help she needed. She assured me her eating disorder was under control, and that she was seeing a therapist and a nutritionist. She always put on a good show,” Haynes says. “She wanted everything in her life to be perfect, and to resist me wouldn’t have been the perfect thing for her to do.”

Whatever help April received wasn’t enough. She died three years later. She was scheduled to see Haynes at the spa that same day.

*Some names have been changed to protect the anonymity of sources.

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As many as 11 million people in the United States battle eating disorders such as anorexia or bulimia. These treatable conditions claim the lives of three people every day in this country alone, according to the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA, www.nationaleatingdisorders.org). The statistics get worse each year: The number of patients hospitalized due to side effects from one of these illnesses rose 18% between 1999 and 2006, according to the U.S. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (ahrq.gov). And that statistic only applies to the estimated one in 10 of those afflicted who seek treatment.

The percentages at day spas don't get any better. A recent DAYSPA survey revealed that more than 60% of industry professionals lack the proper protocols to handle a guest who may be suffering from an eating disorder. Plus, it found that almost half of spa owners don't screen clients about health issues prior to their first treatments. Whether you discover symptoms on your own or your guests confide in you about their eating disorders, what you do with this information is as important to the livelihood of your spa as it is to their health.

“THE CONDITION OF HER HAIR, SKIN AND NAILS PROVED TO ME THAT SHE WASN'T EATING.”

As a business owner, understanding these diseases and knowing how to look for the warning signs may help you save a client's life. You also need to know the legal and ethical issues at stake when it comes to counseling someone who may have an eating disorder. And in the long run, the best approach for you and your guests is adopting healthy and nutritional components to provide a safe, positive environment.

A HEAVY SUBJECT

Karen Blaum-Turi, R.N., first met Claire when she sought plastic surgery to remove what the client called “sagging skin” around her abdomen. “I didn't think she needed it,” says the skincare consultant at Age of Innocence (ageofinnocence.biz), a spa, salon and skin clinic in Shavertown, Pennsylvania. “But she had lost a significant amount of weight, which left behind a bit of loose skin.”

During the screening process before the procedure, Blaum-Turi learned some alarming details:



Approximately 11 million Americans suffer from bulimia or anorexia.

Claire exercised two to three hours a day, and she skipped meals if she missed a workout. “It was obvious that she was using exercise as a way to control her appearance. The condition of her hair,

skin and nails proved to me that she wasn't eating,” says Blaum-Turi, who has undergone medical training to diagnose eating disorders.

Six months after the surgery, Claire returned to seek another operation. When the clinic's doctor refused, she instead signed up for a series of muscular electrolysis treatments to tighten and tone her already overworked body. “It's called the lazy man's exercise. Again, I told her that she didn't need it, but she insisted,” Blaum-Turi says. “My biggest fear is that she's going to develop an electrolyte imbalance and wind up dead.”

The underlying causes of these diseases are far more complex than just the desire to fit into a bikini. While eating disorders often begin with preoccupations with weight, they typically grab hold of their victims due to a number of issues, ranging from physical to psychological. Depression, anxiety, loneliness, anger, difficulty expressing emotions, low self-esteem, feelings of lack of control, and troubled family and personal

THE WARNING SIGNS

A thin appearance or patches of dry skin don't necessarily indicate an eating disorder. If you know what to look for, you can better determine whether someone may be suffering from anorexia or bulimia.

ANOREXIA

Physical:

- Emaciated appearance
- Dry, brittle nails, skin and hair; or hair loss
- Soft, downy hair covering the body, including the arms and face
- Dizziness
- Lack of energy
- Pale or “off-color” complexion
- Low blood pressure
- Feeling cold and wearing extra clothing
- Dramatic weight change in a short period of time

Psychological:

- Perfectionist/obsessive behavior, especially with the diet
- Poor body image
- Denial of a disorder
- Noticeable food restriction
- Unusual meal “rituals,” such as chewing but not swallowing, moving food around the plate, cutting it into pieces and avoiding contact with it
- Rehearsed response when confronted

BULIMIA

Physical:

- Self-induced vomiting, which may cause bruised or callused knuckles
- Bad breath
- Bloodshot eyes
- Bruising and swelling under the eyes or on the cheeks
- Change in dentition (stomach acid erodes teeth)

Psychological:

- Constant dieting
- Denial of a disorder
- Feeling unable to control own eating behaviors
- Eating to the point of discomfort or pain
- Excessive exercise
- Unwillingness to eat in the presence of others, or bingeing and purging behaviors
- Frequent trips to the bathroom after eating, sometimes accompanied by running water to mask the sounds of vomiting
- Use of weight-loss medications or laxatives
- Noticeable mood swings or depression
- Poor sleeping habits

Source: *Something-Fishy.org* (something-fishy.org)

relationships—including a history of physical or sexual abuse—can all be triggers, according to the NEDA.

Since many factors contribute to an eating disorder, it may be even more difficult to distinguish the disease from other medical conditions. For instance, individuals with digestive disorders, anemia or cancer may also exhibit some of the symptoms of anorexia or bulimia. Those include weight loss and changes in the hair, skin and eating behaviors. Even so, there are usually telltale signs for eating disorders, according to Rallie McAllister, M.D. “Anorexia nervosa is marked by an obsession with food and being thin, sometimes to the point of self-starvation, which can be deadly,” says McAllister, a physician, and health, wellness and fitness consultant to the spa industry (www.rallieonhealth.com). “People with anorexia often exercise excessively—sometimes several times a day. They're typically very thin.”

Those suffering from bulimia nervosa, on the other hand, can appear to be of normal weight—or even overweight. The disease is characterized by episodes of bingeing and purging. “Individuals with this disorder typically eat a large amount of food in a short period of time, and then try to rid themselves of the extra calories by vomiting, using laxatives or engaging in extreme exercise,” McAllister says. “In the times between these bingeing/purging episodes, they may not eat much or skip meals altogether.” (See “The Warning Signs,” left, for more physical and psychological clues.)

As a spa professional, the signs you're likely to notice first will be on the skin. “Because it's our largest organ and connected to every major system, the skin reflects the extreme stress that the body is under when someone battles an eating disorder,” says Howard Murad, M.D., associate clinical professor of medicine (dermatology) at UCLA and founder of Murad (www.murad.com). “An underfed body lacks the building blocks needed for strong, healthy cells.”

Symptoms that appear on the skin include dryness, thinning, flakiness and increased sensitivity. Uncharacteristic redness, gray or yellow discoloration, and acne or hyperpigmentation can also develop. “In the most extreme cases, when the body lacks enough vitamin C to produce the collagen needed to create connective tissue, the skin literally begins to fall apart,” says Murad, who also owns the

Murad Medical Spa in El Segundo, California, and a chain of Murad Inclusive Health Centers.

How many spa-goers actually suffer from eating disorders? It's difficult to measure the exact number, but the prevalence of these diseases is reason enough for alarm: One in 200 American women has anorexia, while three in 100 suffer from bulimia, according to the South Carolina Department of Mental Health (state.sc.us/dmh). Plus, 10%-15% of anorexics or bulimics are male.

"When we learn that eating disorder cases outnumber Alzheimer's by more than two to one, it's clear that spa professionals are undoubtedly seeing clients who have them," says Marguerite Barnett, M.D., FACS, owner and director of Mandala Med-Spa (www.mandalamedspa.com) in Sarasota, Florida. "Denial is strong with these diseases, so a client will rarely admit it. But we see guests without their clothes on, and touch their bodies and faces, so we're in a unique position to know."

Still, only half of spa owners who responded to



"We're friends, confidants and counselors, and those we treat are more than just clients—they're guests in our home. We care about them just as much after they leave as we do while they're here."

EVA SZTUPKA-KERSCHBAUMER
Co-owner, ESSpa Kozmetika
Organic Skincare
Pittsburgh
www.esspa.net



"Denial is the issue—they don't see what they're doing as a danger to their health. I always start by asking about the stress in their lives. This gives them a way to open up without feeling forced."

TAREN AVERS
Owner, Bella Donna Spa
Hastings, NE



"I think it's a private, painful, scary and serious problem. It requires professional help and loving support. Spa therapists are good listeners, but most are not educated in the treatment of these complex disorders."

KAFFEE KELDIE
Owner, Kaffee's Garden Spa
West Palm Beach, FL
www.kaffeesgardenspa.com

DAYSPA's survey said they've suspected a guest of having an eating disorder. When asked to estimate the percentage of their spa clients who suffer from anorexia or bulimia, 62% indicated "very few," while 22% presumed "none."

The secretive nature of these diseases may be influencing the numbers, according to industry experts. "Eating disorders are still a taboo subject," says Hannelore Leavy, executive director of the Day Spa Association (DSA, www.dayspaassociation.com). "They haven't come out of the closet yet like alcoholism or domestic violence have. They're still reclusive."

THE THIN LINE

Laura Osuna has watched her sister struggle with anorexia and bulimia since they were teenagers. With her family's help, she encouraged her sister to seek treatment. "She's come to terms with the fact that she has a disorder and needs help," says Osuna, owner of La Dolce Vita Spa for Beauty & Wellness (www.ladolcevitaspa.com) in Long Beach, California.

Massage therapy provided a turning point for Osuna's sister. "Growing up, I remember that she hated being touched; she'd curl up like a cat. But

she bonded with one of our older massage therapists who'd had a mastectomy," she says. "I think my sister trusted her because she'd also experienced insecurities about her body. Little by little, I saw it helping to change her self-image, which led to a healthier life."

Osuna says she never hesitated intervening when it came to her own family member. But when a spa-goer admits to an eating disorder, she treads lightly. "I've had clients confide in me that they have a problem. The first thing I do is encourage them to see a doctor. It's a serious disorder that usually requires treatment in a specialized facility," Osuna says. "But I also tell them my story. I think they feel more comfortable when they know that I've seen what they're going through."

Detecting an eating disorder is complicated in itself, but how you react is critical. Just 36% of DAYSPA survey respondents said they'd bring it up with the client, while only 24% would refer her to a counselor or medical professional. In addition, 20% of all respondents insist that it's not their place to pry into guests' personal lives.

As this shows, opinions vary among spa professionals about how to handle these diseases. "A day spa isn't a medical facility. No esthetician or massage therapist can issue medical opinions," DSA's Leavy says. "Eating disorders are illnesses and should be treated by professionals."

On the other hand, she doesn't advocate apathy. Leavy says that it's the responsibility of each day spa owner to maintain a list of emergency numbers and local resources for any medical issue that may arise. "Every community should have organizations that can help with anything from nutrition, fitness and chiropractic services to domestic violence and mental health counseling," Leavy says. "An eating disorder isn't something anyone in the spa should treat. You can wind up getting sued in a big way."

If spa clients feel their privacy has been invaded

EMPLOYEE MATTERS

Rallie McAllister, M.D., recalls a massage therapist she worked with at a medspa some years ago. "I noticed that she'd eat practically nothing on some days and enormous amounts in one sitting on others," says the family physician and diet expert, who helps day spas develop health and nutrition programs for clients (www.rallieonhealth.com).

McAllister witnessed obvious signs that this employee had a disorder. For instance, after she finished eating a meal,



she'd spend up to 20 minutes in the bathroom, leaving the water running. "When she emerged, she had a red face and tearing eyes. At one point, she had scrapes and bruises on her knuckles—a sign that she'd been using her fingers to induce vomiting," McAllister says. "Her gums were also red and inflamed from exposure to stomach acids."

The worker eventually revealed that she suffered from bulimia. McAllister says the disclosure was a relief at the time, but the problem was only beginning. She spent months trying to gently encourage the worker to discuss her condition with a psychologist. "She just wouldn't budge," says McAllister, who still wonders if she went far enough—or if she should've addressed the problem at all.

For many spa owners, employees are like relatives. And when one's in trouble, a natural instinct is to do anything you can to help. However, when it comes to your staff, there's a fine line between expressing concern and going too far.

"A little bit of common sense will go a long way," says Hannelore Leavy, executive director of the Day Spa Association (DSA, www.dayspaassociation.com). "If an employee's health problem affects her work, the owner has no choice but to address it."

Sandra Haynes worries about someone on her staff as well. But she's even more concerned about what might happen if she says something. "She's extremely private. If I thought her health were in real danger, I'd have to confront her," says the co-owner

of What's New the Salon (www.whatsnewthesalon.com) in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. "She's not visibly sick, but she doesn't seem to eat much. I'm wary of violating her privacy when I just have a suspicion."

And therein lies the dilemma when it comes to your staff: You must consider the legal liabilities with any action you take. "If you have a reasonable basis for your concern, you're likely protected under the law for talking to your employee about it," says Michael L. Antoline, J.D., an Illinois attorney and DAYSPA advisory board member. "For example, if it's clear your employee has lost 60 pounds since she started working for you—and it's weight she didn't have to spare—you have a solid basis for concern."

The legal slope gets slippery if an employer brings up job performance in the course of inquiring about a personal problem. "Let's say you confront the woman who lost the 60 pounds and absolutely insist that she seek therapy. Then you tell her that if she doesn't get help, you'll reduce her hours because you fear she'll miss work due to her health. Well, that's discrimination," Antoline says.

"If you're so worried about what may happen, then don't ask," he adds. "But if you bring it up, you should also know that she's not required to answer you."

For helpful tips on how to approach an employee or client you suspect may have an eating disorder, see "The Keys to Communication," page 72.

—or if they follow any medical advice from an unlicensed professional employed there—the business can be at risk for negligence, according to industry experts. “Immediately, you could be liable for practicing medicine without a license, which carries steep penalties,” says Michael L. Antoline, J.D., an Illinois attorney and DAYSPA advisory board member. “If clients were to follow your advice and become ill or injured as a result, you could be liable in that case as well.”

Antoline says the best way to keep the law on your side is to know exactly what you and your employees are qualified to provide in a day spa setting. “The person interacting with the client needs to understand where her expertise begins and ends,” he says. “Let’s say that you have a nutritionist on staff. She would have a little more leeway in what she could recommend to a client over someone unskilled in nutrition. It’s entirely dependent on your education, training and license.”

Murad endorses a nurturing approach at his spas. “The most a therapist should do is remember how important it is to be gentle and compassionate during treatments,” he says.

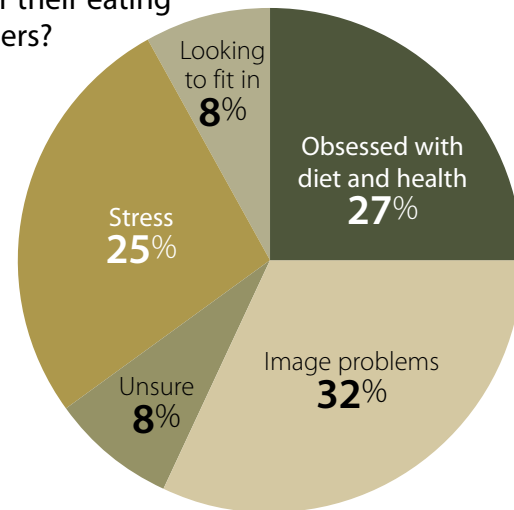
But sometimes compassion compels action—and action saves lives. Jane Courtney couldn’t look away when Elizabeth, a 22-year-old client, began drastically losing weight. “At the time, she was a model and aspiring actress, and the stress got to her,” says the owner of Elysium Spa (www.elysiumspa.com) in Oklahoma City. “Her way of coping was by—as she called it—sculpting her body. She was losing weight and looking gaunt, and her skin was sagging.”

A massage therapist at the spa noticed the changes in Elizabeth. Following several treatments, she

WEIGHING THE ISSUES

DAYSPA conducted an online survey of 3,376 industry professionals nationwide about the prevalence of eating disorders among spa clients. Their responses were compiled in March 2009.

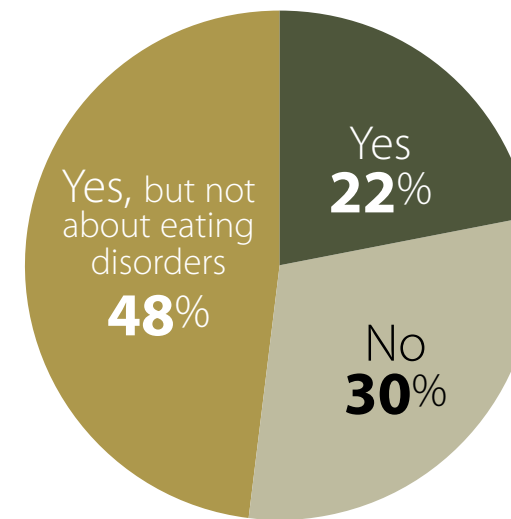
What triggers do clients cite for their eating disorders?



knew the condition was worsening, so she enlisted Courtney’s support and the two decided to act. After initially approaching Elizabeth and getting nowhere, they contacted her mother. “She hadn’t noticed anything, but she thanked us for our concern and said that she’d watch Elizabeth carefully,” Courtney says. “The next time she came in, she hadn’t lost any more weight. She genuinely seemed a lot healthier.”

Courtney later discovered that Elizabeth had been abusing diet pills and aggressively restricting her diet. “I can’t help but think what would’ve

Does your spa prescreen clients about health issues?



happened if we hadn’t said something,” she says.

The experience influenced how Courtney now educates her employees. “We’ve had group training classes about how to observe our clients’ behavior, as well as changes in their skin, hair, eyes and nails,” she says. “Paying attention to their whole health is part of our job.”

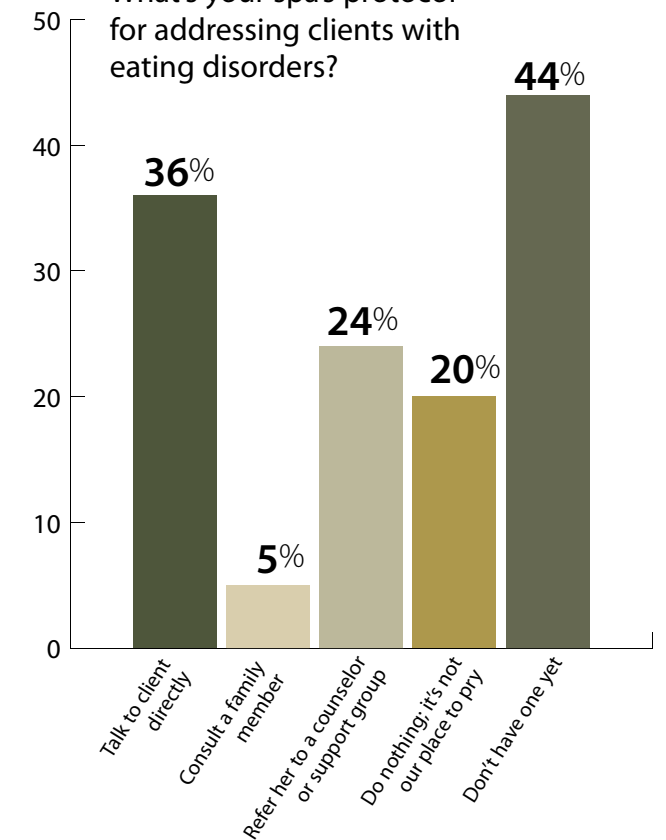
Mandala’s Barnett agrees. “If I told you that the physical consequences of an untreated eating disorder were similar to those of some cancers in terms of side effects and mortality risk, wouldn’t that change your outlook?” she asks.

Each business owner needs to establish her own protocol for addressing the health concerns of clients, and how to train her staff to do the same. Of course, every guest will require a different course of action, depending on her personality and the severity of the situation. Antoline says you should approach each person with equal doses of caution and compassion. “Spa owners have a right to be concerned about their own safety and the livelihood of their businesses,” he says. “But if it’s a moral decision, every provider will need to make it for herself.”

HEALING AND HELPING

After months of worrying about her client’s health, Age of Innocence’s Blaum-Turi finally approached the exercise-obsessed Claire. She denied she had an eating disorder, which is a common reaction among those who suffer from these diseases.

What’s your spa’s protocol for addressing clients with eating disorders?



Blaum-Turi gave her literature on proper skin nutrition and suggested that she see a therapist, but Claire became defensive. “She implied that people who criticized her were just jealous because she was so thin,” Blaum-Turi says.

Claire chose not to seek help, but she eventually opened up about the issue. “She confided in me that her father was always critical of her physique. He placed no emphasis on her inner beauty, but everything on her physical body,” Blaum-Turi says. “All I could do was tell her that I had her best interests at heart. She needed to hear that someone cared about her—and not just how people saw her body.”

When a person suffering on the inside only sees her external flaws, providing a helping, healing hand can make a significant difference. Day spa owners can do this in several ways that don’t put them in an ethical gray area with clients:

- Partner with nutritionists who can further prescribe healthy eating options.
- Administer health screenings during their first visit.

THE KEYS TO COMMUNICATION

Consider the following guidelines if you decide to confront a client or an employee:

1. Choose a safe, private environment.
2. Don’t initiate the discussion while you’re performing a service, such as a manicure, haircut or massage.
3. Remain calm and supportive. Using threats or pleas may make her defensive and shut down the flow of communication.
4. Tell her your concerns. Being open

and honest encourages her to reciprocate.

5. Avoid criticism. Use “I” statements to reduce the risk of her feeling attacked. You might say something such as “I’m worried about you. I’ve noticed that you’ve stopped eating lunch, and I’m concerned about your health.”
6. Make materials available to refer her to an appropriate help group or medical professional (see “Resources and Education,” page 74).

7. If some individuals become angry and defensive, acknowledge that there’s a possibility you could be wrong.
8. Be patient and persistent. It’s unlikely she’ll confide in you right away, but demonstrate your concern and bring it up again if you feel the need. Reiterate that you’re available to offer support or talk about the issue at a later time.

— Courtesy Rallie McAllister, M.D.

“THE STEPS TO RECOVERY FOR EATING-DISORDERED PATIENTS ARE LEARNING TO TRUST IN TOUCH, RELY ON OTHERS AND BOND.”

- Focus services on wellness rather than luxury.
- Offer dietary supplements.

Supplements can be a good place to start, according to diet and health expert McAllister. She says they're readily available, and any spa professional can learn how to best recommend them based on clients' needs. Additionally, a spa-goer isn't likely to take offense to a suggestion that she try vitamins—especially if it's to address a skincare issue. “If you take the time to introduce your guests to the benefits of supplements, they'll likely keep it up once they get into a routine,” McAllister says. (Visit www.dayspamagazine.com for a glossary of supplements.)

Since eating disorders usually wreak havoc on the dermis, Murad suggests supplements containing glucosamine, amino acids, and vitamins A and C. “They help boost collagen production, support connective tissue and stimulate healthy cell renewal,” he says.

Lisa La Barre, C.N., encounters many clients recovering from or concealing eating disorders. However, the nutritionist and esthetician—who

works with Spa 415 (www.spa415.com) in Beverly Hills, California—chooses not to lecture or counsel her clients. Instead, La Barre develops a personalized diet plan that includes lots of nutrients. For example, soups, antioxidant-packed fruits and vegetables, a good multivitamin, and cod liver and fish oil capsules aid and repair the skin from the inside out. “Eating disorders are tricky diseases,” she says. “Any treatment is best left to the professionals.”

While you should always pair nutritional advice with a recommendation for a physician's consultation, keep in mind that the spa itself should serve as a healing environment. Massages in particular offer clients more than relaxation. “The steps to recovery for eating-disordered patients are learning to trust in touch, rely on others and bond,” McAllister says. “You're already providing that in the spa.” For example, Mandala offers a healthy-eating program and employs a doctor of Oriental medicine. He prescribes herbal remedies and administers acupuncture to help with addictive behaviors. Plus, the spa refers clients to a certified hypnotherapist, who has special training to treat those with eating disorders.

Other day spas follow a holistic wellness philosophy. The menu at Le Petite Retreat Day Spa (www.lprdayspa.com) in Los Angeles offers healing treatments such as detoxifying ionic footbaths and energy-balancing jade stone massages. “We realize that medication and vitamins aren't the only treatments available for people to maintain their health,” says owner Lysa Kustek.

These spas, and many others, now understand their roles in wellness and disease prevention. Fostering that philosophy at your facility can better prepare you for dealing with someone suffering from a severe condition, such as an eating disorder. “Every time I meet with spa professionals, I tell them how much good they're doing,” McAllister says. “We can't offer that kind of caring, healing touch in the medical world. But when you provide a massage or facial—when you transfer that positive energy—that's what cures people. It's the most powerful healing tool in the world.” ●

RESOURCES AND EDUCATION

National Eating Disorders Association provides information and resources for counselors, parents and patients. **800.931.2237**, www.nationaleatingdisorders.org

International Association of Eating Disorders Professionals offers education and counseling to individuals, businesses and therapists through seminars and classes. **800.800.8126**, www.iaedp.com

Academy for Eating Disorders is a research institute that promotes education, and proper detection and treatment. **847.498.4274**, www.aedweb.org

Something-Fishy.org includes a comprehensive eating disorders treatment finder. **866.690.7239**, www.something-fishy.org

The Eating Recovery Center provides treatment of the most severe eating disorders through the provision of 24/7 medical attention from psychiatrists, physicians and nurses. **877.825.8584**, www.eatingrecoverycenter.com