Guidelines for Media Professionals on the Responsible Coverage of Eating Disorders

1. Recognising eating disorders as a serious and complex illness with long-term consequences
   It is important that responsible media professionals have a good understanding of the subject of eating disorders and are familiar with the current scientific insights into its causes, consequences and related issues. They are aware of their special responsibility to report accurately, their potential to shape society’s ideas of what is normal and what is beautiful, and their responsibility for the people with whom they work.

2. Allowing greater diversity of body shapes
   For decades the media have presented a limited view of ideal bodies, especially for girls and women. This is increasingly the case for boys and men too. Responsible media professionals do all they can to counter this trend and provide greater diversity in the media regarding people’s size, weight, bodily features and other aspects of their appearance. They counter the idealisation of underweight bodies with, among other measures, a minimum BMI for models, actors and presenters.

3. Avoiding weight-based discrimination
   Responsible media professionals avoid disparaging and criticising bodyweight and certain body parts. It is their aim to see people holistically and to treat them with respect.

4. Debunking the equation “beautiful = thin + sexy = successful”
   Because television almost exclusively shows very thin people or portrays overweight people as less attractive and less successful, the impression is created that being thin is a prerequisite for a happy life and social success. Acting responsibly in the media means consciously debunking this inaccurate and discriminatory equation and avoiding scenes in which extreme weight loss is glorified or indeed portrayed as a solution to social problems (loneliness, isolation, bullying, etc.).

5. Promoting a realistic discussion of healthy eating
   Responsible media professionals promote a realistic discussion of healthy eating. They collaborate with nutrition experts and avoid demonising food and certain foodstuffs such as fat and carbohydrates. Responsible media professionals know that programmes showing how people lose weight in a very short space of time can trigger or reinforce disturbed eating behaviour on the part of viewers. Accordingly, they always present weight loss in the context of a holistic and healthy body concept and mental health.

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1 These guidelines were developed on the basis of interviews with experts. 44 people involved in the professional care of patients with eating disorders freely offered their advice for media professionals. The statements that proved typical were then compiled in collaboration with Dr Sigrid Dohme (Frankfurter Zentrum für Ess-Störungen), Prof Dr Eva Wunderer (University of Applied Sciences Landshut), Martina Hartman (Beratungszentrum bei Essstörungen Dick & Dünn e. V., Berlin) and other certified experts in the field of eating disorders. We extend our sincere thanks to all of them.
Responsibly portraying and reporting on eating disorders means paying attention to:

1. **Portraying and reporting on eating disorders realistically**
   Eating disorders are often a severe and long-term illness frequently entailing long-term physical and mental consequences. Responsible media treatment of eating disorders aims to report on various symptoms and their background, to avoid playing down the emotional suffering of those affected and their families, and to appropriately inform the public of the consequences and dangers of eating disorders. Responsible treatment of the illness avoids sensational reporting or displaying thin bodies and obviously underweight models on the catwalk. Idealising or glorifying eating disorders is also avoided, as are unnecessary dramatisation or discriminatory terms such as “waif”, “bag of bones”, “whale”, “tub”, etc.

2. **Avoiding scenes that could reinforce eating disorders**
   Eating disorders can be triggered by media portrayals. Scenes in which, for instance, vomiting or excessive eating are shown in detail can lead to imitation and thus contribute to the development of an eating disorder. Responsible reporting and fictional portrayal of the subject means being aware of these connections and carefully considering how to take a suitable path between realistic portrayal, education and incitement to imitation.

3. **A sensitive approach to sufferers**
   Eating disorders are mental illnesses. Accordingly, responsible media professionals are sensitive in their dealings with sufferers. In consultation with professionals, insensitive remarks such as “But you don’t look so thin” to a young woman suffering from anorexia are discussed beforehand and avoided. Responsible reporting constantly maintains the dignity of the persons affected and avoids simplifying complex causes and apportioning guilt within the social environment.

4. **Expert advice**
   Responsible media professionals are aware of the need for professional advice from experts on eating disorders. At an early stage of planning a programme they consult experts. If people suffering from eating disorders get in contact through readers’ letters, the responsible approach to preparing a reply is to involve professionally trained experts as a matter of course.

5. **Specific information on professional help for sufferers**
   People suffering from an eating disorder require professional support. Responsible reporting communicates this and always accompanies a report or a fictional portrayal of the subject with specific information on counselling centres, clinics and (semi-) inpatient and psychotherapy support.