

## **EATING DISORDERS – SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS**

### **Introduction**

Many people have issues to do with food and eating but that does not mean they have an eating disorder. In our society a certain amount of disruption within the natural process of eating (to satiate hunger, and stopping when you are full), is seen as within the normal range of eating behaviour. So-called “comfort eating”, for example, is a recognised behavioural phenomenon, as is overeating at times of cultural and family celebration such as Christmas.

However, some women and men experience great disruption to their thinking and behaviour around food, which can cause great distress and even be life-threatening. The main four recognised forms of eating disorder are **anorexia, bulimia, binge eating disorder and compulsive eating**, and it is possible for there to be some overlap between them in terms of how people think about and manage their food intake. This handout outlines the thoughts and behaviours characteristic of these eating disorders so that you can recognise the signs - but the subject of how to tackle them is too large to cover here. At the end you will find a booklist and website resources, and if you think you need help yourself, the ongoing support of a counsellor as well as family and friends can add to your knowledge and boost you towards recovery. Recovery is definitely possible, even though it may take longer than you would like... but don't give up, you deserve to feel better and have your life back.

There are many theories about the origins of eating disorders, be they psychological, behavioural, genetic etc. The reality is probably a combination of different factors in most cases. Everyone is different and anybody suffering from an eating disorder deserves to be treated as an individual, when they describe how the problem started and took hold. A combination of counselling, leading to psychological insight, and behavioural changes which are maintained, is often the route to success in getting back to normal.

### **Anorexia**

This eating disorder is characterised by some or all of the following symptoms:

- A drastic drop in body weight which is not experienced as “enough” by the person who is restricting their food intake.
- Cutting down on frequency and amount of food intake, often with a great obsession on calculating the calorific values of food.
- Limiting the self to a calorific limit of food per day, and then decreasing this over time, often until eating well under 500 calories-worth of food a day.
- A high preoccupation with body weight, with weighing occurring once, more than once, or even very frequently, every day.
- As the anorexic person becomes ever thinner, their cognitive thinking and powers of perception become distorted, and they will see themselves as fatter and heavier than they really are.

- There is a huge fear of putting on weight which is equated with “getting fat” and constant monitoring to make sure that this does not happen.
- Sometimes anorexic people binge, but these binges are usually on relatively small amounts of food because of the shrinking of the stomach.
- Vomiting or excessive exercise are also sometimes used to “cancel out” the normal food intake or a binge.
- A lot of time spent on exercise is often part of the way the anorexic person loses more and more weight, as well as food restriction.
- As the anorexia progresses the person will avoid or refuse social eating opportunities, and often becomes more socially withdrawn entirely.
- When very thin, anorexic people will feel constantly cold, and fine body hair known as lanugo develops all over their body. They will also feel physically weak and tired all the time.
- A constant mental preoccupation with food in general, and what the person will or won't eat that day/week.

## **Bulimia**

This eating disorder is characterised by some or all of the following symptoms:

- Self-induced vomiting after snacks or meals when the person feels they have eaten “too much”.
- A person taking laxatives and/or diuretics in the same circumstances, often to dangerously high dosage levels.
- A high preoccupation with body size and shape, and a subjective desire to become thinner or differently proportioned (most bulimics however, remain within the normal weight range for their build and height).
- This desire can lead to “going on a diet”. Bulimic people will often be on, just off, or about to start another, “diet” regime.
- Occasional or frequent bingeing on food, usually in private, and sometimes involving copious amounts of food being consumed in one sitting. These occasions are usually punctuated and/or followed by self-induced vomiting.
- A high preoccupation with the calorific values of foods, and calculation of total calorie intake over a day, or within one meal.
- A high preoccupation with weight, often with weighing occurring once, more than once, or very frequently, every day.
- Other compensatory activities such as excessive exercising, de-toxing or not eating at all for prolonged periods of time, particularly after binges.
- Occasional or total avoidance of social eating opportunities; or after a meal in company, self-induced vomiting.
- Feelings of being “out of control” around food.
- A high preoccupation with food in general.

A note on **Binge Eating Disorder**: this was recognised as a separate disorder from bulimia from the late 1980's onwards. There are many similarities, in fact the major difference is that people with Binge Eating Disorder don't take the extreme weight control measures, especially self-induced vomiting, that bulimics employ. See the book list for Dr C Fairburn's book on BED.

## **Compulsive Eating**

This eating disorder is characterised by some or all of the following symptoms:

- Frequent or constant nibbling/grazing/snacking on foods throughout the waking hours.
- Regular meals but additional eating when not physically hungry, usually without having planned to eat.
- Bingeing frequently or occasionally on large amounts of favourite foods and/or drinks (including alcohol).
- Physical weight gain (but many compulsive eaters maintain normal weight)
- The "diet/binge cycle" where the person adheres to a diet regime, and then "blows it" by bingeing. Accompanying guilt and self-reproach leads to the start of another diet and the cycle is maintained.
- Maintenance of normal weight, usually through compensatory activities such as regular exercise or periods of "de-tox".
- A high preoccupation with body size and shape. The person often wishes to be thinner or differently proportioned.
- A high preoccupation with weight, and weighing frequently, even daily.
- Self-induced vomiting or taking laxatives is sometimes used after bingeing to compensate for the huge calorific intake.
- A high preoccupation with food in general.
- Feelings of being "out of control" around food.

### **IF YOU RECOGNISE SOME OF THESE SYMPTOMS :**

Eating disorders can be dangerous to health in various ways, for example the risks of malnutrition and regular self-induced vomiting. It is important to get support and expert help to address the problem, particularly if it is long-standing. If you think you have an eating disorder, or you are concerned about someone who does, there are many sources of help. The NTU Student Counselling Service offers individual counselling, which is entirely confidential. If desired we can refer students to alternative counselling agencies and Nottingham also has a specialist NHS Eating Disorders Service to which GPs can refer students under certain circumstances.

## **BOOKS**

Breaking Free from Anorexia Nervosa: A Survival Guide for Families, Friends and Sufferers Janet Treasure. Psychology Press

Getting Better Bit(e) by Bit(e): Survival Kit for Sufferers of Bulimia Nervosa and Binge Eating Disorders Ulrike Schmidt and Janet Treasure. Psychology Press

Bulimia Nervosa and Binge Eating: A Guide to Recovery Peter Cooper. Constable & Robinson

Overcoming Binge Eating Christopher G Fairburn. Guilford Press

Breaking Free from Compulsive Eating Geneen Roth. Plume Books

When Food Is Love Geneen Roth. Penguin Books

When Women Stop Hating Their Bodies Jane Hirschmann and Carol Munter. Fawcett Books

Overcoming Overeating: Conquer Your Obsession with Food Forever Jane Hirschmann and Carol Munter. Vermilion

## **WEBSITES**

[www.b-eat.co.uk](http://www.b-eat.co.uk) - website of the Eating Disorders Association. Advice & information for sufferers, friends and families  
National Helpline – 0345 634 1414

[www.eating-disorders.org.uk](http://www.eating-disorders.org.uk) - website of the National Centre for Eating Disorders with advice, information and help finding appropriate therapy  
National Helpline – 0845 838 2040