

# YOUNGMINDS



The voice for young people's mental health and wellbeing

**WORRIED ABOUT  
EATING PROBLEMS  
AND DISORDERS?**



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## WHAT THIS BOOKLET TELLS YOU

This booklet will help you if you want to know more about eating problems and disorders such as anorexia and bulimia.



### It includes information about:

- > What eating problems and disorders are
- > Why people get eating problems and disorders
- > How to cope with eating problems and disorders
- > What other young people have found helpful about in-patient units
- > How friends and family can help
- > Some useful contact numbers

in **12**

**teenagers suffer  
from eating problems**

## WHAT ARE EATING PROBLEMS AND DISORDERS?

Everybody needs to eat to live – food is a very important part of our lives. We all like different foods and need different amounts of food. Just as people have different hair colour, we also have different bodies, heights, bone structures and builds. Body fat is stored in different places in our bodies, due to our genes. It is most important to have a healthy body weight (and a certain amount of body fat) to keep our bodies working.

Most people are unhappy with their bodies some of the time – thinking they are too fat, too thin, or just the wrong shape. This can be especially true for teenagers whose bodies are changing a lot, often very quickly. These worries will generally pass with time.

Many people try out diets and usually this is not a problem. However, sometimes, eating patterns can become unhealthy, for example if you eat too much or too little because you are feeling unhappy or stressed. It can be easier to control the way you eat than to cope with painful feelings. Over time, this can become dangerous to your emotional and physical health.



There are different kinds of eating problems and disorders – some are more serious than others. All eating difficulties are worrying. It's when you or your friends or family become troubled by your eating habits, if you are losing weight and thinking about it all the time that it becomes an eating problem. It's important to talk about your worries and feel supported as if left alone, your worries and eating problems may continue and get worse. You may get help and support from parents, friends, school or college counsellors, or your GP.

**EATING PROBLEMS  
AND  
DISORDERS  
ARE NOT JUST  
ABOUT FOOD  
THEY ARE ABOUT  
FEELINGS**

For some young people, their eating problems become more serious and extreme. Either not eating or over-eating builds up and persists over many months so that their physical health, and in some cases even their lives, can be put at high risk. Their everyday life at home and in school may well be seriously disrupted. These young people are not well, either physically or emotionally. It is when eating problems like this reach a disturbing level that specialists use the term eating disorders – the most severe disorders being called anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa.

Sometimes people use these terms to cover all kinds of eating problems. The shorter terms anorexia and bulimia (or anorexic and bulimic) are more appropriately used for the less extreme though still worrying eating problems – for example a loss of appetite which may primarily have a physical cause.

Eating problems and disorders are more common in girls but is becoming more common in boys too. People from all backgrounds and all ages can suffer.



**10%**

**of all people with  
eating disorders  
are male**

**20%**

**of young women  
diet either all or  
some of the time**

## ANOREXIA

If you have anorexia, you might think about food, fat content or calories all the time and try to avoid eating. Losing weight might make you feel in control, or give you a sense of success which makes you feel good, but it can be difficult to know when to stop.

Your body needs a certain amount of nutrition to keep it working. If you are not getting enough nutrition, you become tired, and find it difficult to concentrate or think. If you judge yourself on how much you eat, you might feel that you will never be good enough unless you lose more weight – it can make you feel bad about yourself. Often, people with anorexia still feel fat even though they are really very thin.

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**I started a diet. When I lost the amount of weight I wanted to I felt a sense of achievement so continued to lose weight. I come to the hospital to help me get over anorexia.**

”



## SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF ANOREXIA



If you have anorexia, you might have some of the following symptoms. The more symptoms you have and the more persistent and extreme they become, the more likely it is you may be suffering from anorexia nervosa (ie. a serious eating disorder).

- > Loss of a lot of weight very quickly
- > Eating less and less
- > Feeling panicky if you have to eat a big meal
- > Thinking about food all the time, maybe wanting to cook for others
- > Comparing yourself with other people's body size
- > Loss of periods, or periods not starting in girls
- > Being moody or down
- > Trying to be perfect
- > Feeling cold
- > Not feeling like mixing with people
- > Thinking you are fatter than you actually are
- > Sleeping problems
- > Growth of downy body hair
- > Teeth problems through being sick a lot

## BULIMIA

People with bulimia usually keep their weight steady, so it can be very hard to tell if someone has bulimia. However, they still think constantly about food and calories. As with anorexia, bulimia is a way of using food to cope with painful feelings – sometimes people can have symptoms of both disorders. Some people have had anorexia in the past, but become bulimic.

People with bulimia ‘binge-eat’ – they eat a lot of food very quickly. This makes them feel guilty and bad about themselves, so they might try and get rid of the food by making themselves sick, or taking lots of laxatives (tablets or medicine that make you go to the toilet a lot). Some people feel so bad that they harm themselves, or misuse alcohol or drugs.

People with bulimia might get stuck in a cycle of bingeing when they feel upset or stressed, then punishing themselves by vomiting, starving themselves or taking laxatives. While they might seem like they are coping on the outside, inside they feel lonely and scared – like no-one can understand their problem.

## SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF BULIMIA



Bingeing and vomiting can in the long run do serious harm to the body. If you have bulimia, you might get some of the following symptoms. Again, the more symptoms you have and the more persistent and extreme they become, the more likely it is that you may be suffering from bulimia nervosa (ie. a serious eating disorder).

- > Sore throat and mouth infections
- > Dehydration, and poor skin
- > Changes in periods if you are a girl
- > Muscle spasms (especially from using too many laxatives)
- > Bad teeth (from being sick)
- > Going to the toilet after meals
- > Binge-eating
- > Heart problems
- > Sleeping problems
- > Swollen glands
- > Isolating yourself
- > Feeling helpless

“**One night I ate loads when my parents were out. I felt really disgusted with myself, and terrified I’d end up like a hippo. I took an overdose because I hated myself. I went to hospital and had my stomach pumped, it was horrible.**”

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## WHY DO PEOPLE GET EATING PROBLEMS AND DISORDERS?



It's good to want to be a healthy weight so our bodies can work well. However, sometimes what you think about food can get muddled up with what you think and feel about yourself. If things are going wrong in your life, sometimes it can go wrong in how you treat your body. Some of the reasons people get eating problems and disorders include:

- > Feeling out of control – you might feel like your body is the only thing you have control over
- > Wanting to be popular – thinking if you are slim you will be more attractive to other people
- > Knowing parents who worry about their own weight and diet
- > Wanting to be like other people who are successful eg. models – confusing slimness with success
- > Carrying on without eating much after an illness (eg. flu), even though the illness has gone
- > Starting a diet but not being able to stop
- > Not realising that a bit of body fat is normal and needed for health!
- > Feeling you aren't good enough – thinking that everything will be better if you are thinner
- > Hating your body – this might be because something bad has happened to you, for example, if you have been abused

## WAYS OF COPING WITH EATING PROBLEMS AND DISORDERS

People with anorexia or bulimia may not accept that they have a problem, and may hide the fact they are not eating. They may lie about what they eat, or refuse any help. Sometimes though, this hides their feelings of fear about what is happening to them. Once they accept that they have a problem, there is a lot of help available!

It can be really hard to cope with an eating problem or disorder on your own. Talking to someone might help you feel more able to cope. Try and talk to someone you like and trust, such as a...

- > Friend
- > Brother or sister
- > Grandparents
- > Parent or carer
- > Aunt or uncle
- > Friend's parent



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**At the time I didn't want anything to happen and I thought I was alright, but I realise now that if it had [been alright] I wouldn't have got this bad.**

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## Other people you could talk to could be your...

- > Teacher or College Tutor
- > School/Youth/Student counsellor
- > Connexions Adviser
- > School nurse
- > Youth worker

You could also go to your doctor who should be sympathetic and listen to you. They may be able to prescribe some medicines which will help you or they may refer you to specialist professionals such as psychiatrists, psychologists or psychotherapists or youth counsellor.

What you tell the doctor will be confidential – they should not tell anyone what you tell them, unless your health or safety is at serious risk. Then your doctor must tell your parent or carer.

If you speak to a counsellor or therapist, or specialist professional, they will be very sympathetic to your worries. They will give you some time to think about your feelings, and eating problems. They are trained and will be interested to learn more from you about how you feel and what you think about yourself. They respect confidentiality, and if you want to, may meet you with family members.

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I was really nervous when I came into the unit and I wouldn't talk to the staff and I wouldn't talk to the other patients, but now I'm really involved with it, I'm having a laugh at my dinner time, I sometimes even look forward to my food, which I really thought would never happen.

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You may also be referred to a dietician who can tell you about how your eating habits affect your body, and help you regain a healthy eating pattern.

In most cases, you will be seen as an out-patient, perhaps based at a hospital or adolescent in-patient unit. Sometimes, if your weight is dangerously low and you are diagnosed as having anorexia nervosa, you may have to stay in hospital.

For a minority of young people a stay in an in-patient unit with other young people can be helpful. While this might sound frightening, it can give you a chance to talk to trained staff, and some time to work through your difficulties.

It can be really difficult to admit that you need help, even to yourself, but the earlier that you try and get some help, the easier it will be to recover.

For more information, or support, try some of the places at the end of this booklet.

“ **The psychiatrist listened and I got more say in what was happening and he helped my mum and dad understand it.** ”

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## **FRIENDS AND FAMILY – WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP?**



Support from friends and family can be essential for people struggling to get over an eating problem or disorder. However, it can be difficult to know how to help, especially if the person with the eating problem or disorder is not yet ready to face their difficulties. You might feel helpless, and their rejection might put pressure on your relationship with them.

### **Things you can do to help if you think a friend might have an eating problem or disorder:**

- > Give them time, and listen
- > Encourage them to seek help – it is important for them to get medical advice
- > Let them know you are worried, and that you are there for them
- > Remind them why you like and value them
- > Include them in activities, even if they have not been joining in with things
- > Get some information on eating problems and disorders (see the end of this leaflet)
- > If you are worried, or finding it difficult to cope with on your own, talk to an adult that you trust, or contact one of the places in the help section at the end of this leaflet.
- > Make sure you look after yourself as well!



## Some things to avoid:

- > Don't take responsibility for your friend's problems
- > Don't feel guilty – it's not your fault
- > Don't change your own eating habits – it's important that your friend is reminded of healthy eating habits
- > Don't give up – even though your friend may push you away or tell you to mind your own business.

**Stay interested.**

**DON'T GIVE UP**  
even though your friend may  
**push you away**  
**or tell you**  
to mind your own business.  
**STAY INTERESTED**

## WHO CAN HELP?

It may help to contact some of these places:

### BEAT

Support and information for people with eating disorders and their carers through telephone helplines, a network of self-help groups and newsletters.

**Helpline** (age 18+) : ..... **0345 634 1414**

Mon-Fri 2-4pm

**Email:** ..... **help@b-eat.co.uk**

**Youthline** (under 25): ..... **0345 634 7650**

Mon-Fri 2-4pm

**Callback service:** ..... **Text 'callback' to 07786 201 820**

**Email:** ..... **fyp@b-eat.co.uk**

**Website:** ..... **www.b-eat.co.uk**

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### NHS CHOICES

Gives advice and information on any health issue and medication, and can tell you where you can register with a GP and dentist.

**Tel:**..... **0845 46 47** (24 hours)

**Website:**..... **www.nhs.uk**

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### GET CONNECTED

Connects young people to organisations that can help them, whatever the problem, including family concerns and support for young carers.

**Freephone:** ..... **0808 808 4994** (7 days a week, 1pm-11.00pm)

**Website:** ..... **www.getconnected.org.uk**

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## **YOUTH ACCESS**

Provides information and advice on counselling services throughout the UK for young people aged 12–25 years. Can give details of appropriate local agencies for young people. Go to the ‘find your local service’ section of the website.

**Website:** ..... [www.youthaccess.org.uk](http://www.youthaccess.org.uk)

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## **NSPCC**

Experts in child abuse however they also provide counselling and advice to children on a range of issues.

**Helpline for children & young people:** .. 0800 1111

**Helpline for adults:** ..... 0808 800 5000

**Textphone:** ..... 88858

**Email:** ..... [help@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:help@nspcc.org.uk)

**Website:** ..... [www.nspcc.org.uk](http://www.nspcc.org.uk)

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## **CHILDLINE**

The UK’s free 24 hour helpline for children and young people, providing a confidential telephone counselling service for any problem. It comforts, advises and protects. You can also find information on their website about the issues faced by children and young people including bullying, exams, family relationships and friendships.

**Helpline:** ..... 0800 1111

**Living away from home:**..... 0800 88 44 44

**Website and online chat:**..... [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

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