

Eating Disorders: A Rough Guide for Young Men



This leaflet will help you understand how eating disorders can affect boys and young men. You will find more useful information in the booklet 'beating eating disorders'. Leaflets are available free of charge from the *beat* Youthline.

"Losing weight gave me a real buzz and I felt good at something. At first, starving myself and over-exercising made me feel great and that I had loads of energy. Later I found out that this was an 'artificial high' and that it was my body's way of telling me to find food."

WHAT ARE EATING DISORDERS?

Food and eating play a very important part in our lives. We all vary in the foods we like, how much we need to eat, and when we like to eat. Food is essential for our health and development.

It's not unusual for young people to experiment with food. For example you may have decided to become a vegetarian, or to try out new and more exotic foods. As you grow, your body shape will change, especially through puberty. Maybe you have also tried changing your diet to improve your health? All of this, within reason is acceptable.

However, some eating patterns can be damaging. Problems with food begin when it is used to cope with those times when you are bored, anxious, angry, lonely, ashamed or sad. Food becomes a problem when it is used to help you to cope with painful situations or feelings or relieving stress. If this is how you deal with food and you are unhappy about it, then you should talk about it with someone you trust. Try not to bottle up your feelings because this is not helpful to you or other people around you, it won't make you feel any better and the problem will not go away.

Many people assume that eating disorders only affect teenage girls. This is not true. Research shows about a quarter of people affected by an eating disorder at school age are boys. Amongst adults at least 10% of people *diagnosed* as having an eating disorder are male. However there are probably many more undiagnosed cases because there is less chance of the condition being recognised in male sufferers. Many males find it hard to ask for help especially when the doctor or counsellor does not recognise their symptoms.

One of the most common symptoms of eating disorders in boys is an excessive concern about fitness leading to over-exercising. This can put excessive pressure upon joints and lead to muscular complaints. It may also strain heart and lungs.

There are many reasons why people develop eating disorders. Often there is not one single cause, but a series of events, feelings or pressures which make you feel unable to cope. These can include: low self esteem, family relationships, problems with friends, the death of someone special, problems at school (for example being bullied, pressure of exams etc.), lack of confidence, or sexual or emotional abuse. Many people talk about simply feeling 'not good enough'. Lots of people with eating disorders say that the eating disorder is the only way they feel they can be in control of their life, but as time goes on it isn't really you who is in control - it is the eating disorder. Some people also find they are affected by an urge to harm themselves or abuse alcohol or drugs.

The full medical names for anorexia and bulimia are Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa. For simplicity we have called them anorexia and bulimia.

It's important to know that not everyone will have the same symptoms, some people will have a mix of symptoms and you do not need to have all the symptoms to have a serious eating disorder.

WHAT IS ANOREXIA NERVOSA?

Anorexia is a disorder (or illness) which stems from low self esteem and an inability to cope safely with worries and problems. It involves lowering your food intake by skipping meals and cutting down the types and amounts of food you eat; some people over-exercise as well. You may believe that if you lose weight your life would be happier, people will like you more, you will be more successful or even perhaps that you may be noticed less.

"I had a 'voice' in my head that shouted at me. It told me I was fat and worthless and that I was not allowed to eat because I did not deserve food. I thought I was in control of my eating but it got harder and harder to ignore the voice."

You may try to find ways of punishing yourself if you don't lose enough weight or eat something you would not usually eat. Losing weight is not the answer. It is important that you try and focus on who you are, and what may have caused you to feel the way you do. Try to change the way you feel about yourself and aim to find safer ways of coping.

Some of the ways that anorexia can affect you are:

Your body:

Severe weight loss; difficulty sleeping and tiredness; dizziness; stomach pains; constipation; feeling cold; growth of downy (soft and fine) hair all over your body; low sex drive; your head hair falls out.

How you behave:

Excessive exercising; having ritual or obsessive behaviours; being secretive; lying about eating; trying to please everyone; cooking or preparing food for everyone else; wearing baggy clothes.

How you think and feel:

Feeling fat when you are really underweight; getting irritable and moody; setting high standards and being a perfectionist; shutting yourself off from the world; thinking things are either right or wrong, there is no in between; difficulty concentrating.

WHAT IS BULIMIA NERVOSA?

Bulimia is also a disorder linked with self esteem, emotional problems and stress. You may constantly think about calories, dieting and ways of getting rid of the food you have eaten. Bulimia is actually more common than anorexia, but is more of a hidden illness, because people with bulimia usually remain an average or just over average body weight. Bulimia can go unnoticed for a long time, although you may feel ill and very unhappy.

"I used to go to the food cupboard, fridge or freezer and eat as much as I could, as quickly as possible, to try to make myself feel happier and fill the hole I felt I had inside. Afterwards I felt physically and emotionally upset and guilty about all the food I had eaten, so I would make myself sick."

If you have bulimia you become involved in a cycle of eating a very large amount of food, making yourself sick, cutting down or starving for a few days or trying to find other ways to make up for the food you have eaten. Starving causes you to become so hungry that you eat large amounts of food because your body is craving nourishment. Some people will not vomit but will take laxatives: both behaviours may be described as 'purging' by medical professionals but taking laxatives is particularly dangerous.

Just because bulimia does not cause the extreme weight loss that anorexia does, it does not mean that it is less serious. You need to get help and support. The side effects and consequences of bulimia can be very serious.

Symptoms of bulimia may include some of the following:

Your body:

Sore throat, bad breath and mouth infections; stomach pains; dry or poor skin; difficulty sleeping; constipation; puffy cheeks; dehydration; fainting; kidney and bowel problems.

How you behave:

Eating large quantities of food; being sick after meals or binges; taking laxatives or diet pills; being secretive and lying.

How you think and feel:

Feeling emotional and depressed; feeling out of control; mood swings; obsessed with dieting.

WHAT IS BINGE EATING DISORDER (BED) AND COMPULSIVE OVEREATING?

If you binge eat, you may eat large amounts of food in a short period of time (perhaps not at a normal mealtime) and feel a lack of control during these binges, but unlike someone with bulimia nervosa, you do not try to get rid of the food. You may feel your eating is out of control, eat what you think of as an unusually large amount of food, eat much more quickly in these binges, eat until you are uncomfortably full, eat large amounts of food when you are not hungry or eat alone. You do this for very similar reasons to someone with bulimia.

Compulsive overeating involves 'picking' at food all day. There may be different reasons why you do this, but as with eating disorders, food and eating is used as a way of dealing with difficult feelings. If you compulsively overeat or binge eat, you may feel depressed or inadequate because you cannot control your eating, which can lead to further eating and weight gain.

Symptoms of binge eating may include some of the following:

Eating large quantities of food; being secretive and lying. Weight gain; stomach pains; poor or spotty skin; difficulty sleeping; constipation. Feeling emotional and depressed; feeling out of control; mood swings; obsessed with weight

WHAT IS A HEALTHY DIET?

A healthy diet is one with plenty of variety, including all of the food groups - proteins, dairy, fat, carbohydrates and fruit and vegetables. It is important to keep carbohydrates in your diet because they provide you with essential nutrients and energy. Fat is necessary in your diet because vitamins A, D and K can only dissolve in fat, they are also needed by the body to provide the fluids which lubricate joints and they help the body to store energy for use in the future.

As a young person, you should be growing and putting on weight throughout your teens. Your bones should become denser and grow longer. If you don't get enough nourishment it can lead to problems including: stunted growth, brittle bones and reduced fertility, which in some circumstances may be irreversible.

WHO CAN I TALK TO?

It is really important to seek help quickly. The longer you leave it, the longer you will stay trapped, depressed and isolated and the harder it is to recover.

If you need answers to questions, support, or a listening ear you can contact the *beat* Youthline by phone. This is a confidential service and we are able to call you back to save you the cost of the call. We also reply to letters and e-mails if you find it difficult to call or just prefer to write. The contact details are on the back cover. If you would like to look for some more information before talking to someone visit the website at www.b-eat.co.uk

If you have already talked to a friend about what has been happening, well done! You should also think about talking to an adult. Try and find someone you can trust - someone you can talk openly to about your difficulties. Sometimes it can be easier to talk to someone at school or a club before you to talk to someone in your family.

"I made a huge fuss about having to eat, but although I hated it, I was desperate for someone to be stronger than my anorexia. If it was left up to me, I probably would have died."

DO I HAVE TO TELL MY FAMILY?

Decide what is right for your situation. You may just want to tell one family member at a time or tell them altogether. You may feel that you would prefer to talk to another member of the family first rather than your parents/carers and ask them to help you tell others. It is usually a good idea to tell brothers or sisters but it's important that you don't make them uncomfortable by asking them to keep it a secret.

HOW WILL THEY REACT?

There may be a whole range of reactions from your family. They may appear shocked or defensive. There may be tears, angry outbursts and they may say things that they didn't mean or later regret. They may feel responsible for your illness and say things like 'Where did we go wrong?' or 'Why did this happen to us?' This may be where you find you cannot give explanations about your actions, which can be difficult and painful. Your parents/carers may also want to talk to someone about their feelings and concerns around your eating disorder. They can call, write or e-mail the *beat* Adult Helpline; the details are on the back cover.

DO I HAVE TO SEE A DOCTOR OR HEALTH PROFESSIONAL?

Eating disorders are an illness and when you are poorly it is usual to see a Doctor or nurse. It is very difficult to get better on your own if you have an eating disorder. As well as having support from those who care for you, you need to have professional help. Willpower alone is not enough. Doctors can assess your physical condition and refer you to help available. Eating disorders can be very serious and in the most serious cases can result in death.

"I was so scared about telling my doctor. I really believed that he would tell me that I was too fat to have anorexia. He said that I should tell my parents, but I didn't want to because I didn't want to let them down. Now I don't know what I would have done without them."

You may feel very nervous or scared, which can make it difficult to remember the questions you wanted to ask. Perhaps you could write down a list of questions before you go. If you find the answers difficult to follow, then ask the person to explain until you do understand. It is important that you know what is happening and why. Take notes if you think it will help you to remember.

Here are some questions you might want to ask:

- What will happen next?
- What will my treatment involve?
- What will happen to me?
- Are any other people likely to be involved?
- What are the drugs/ medicine for?
- Is there anyone I can go to locally that I can talk to about my feelings?
- Do I have to go into hospital?

"It was quite good having my social worker with me when I had to talk about my eating disorder. If there was something I didn't understand or if I wanted to ask anything, she would help me. Sometimes she didn't understand either, and she would find out, which made me feel less stupid!"

WHAT SORT OF TREATMENT IS AVAILABLE?

The types and availability vary around the country and different types of help may be offered. Treatment should include dealing with the emotional as well as the physical issues and doing this slowly so that you are able to cope with the changes. It is important to talk with someone about the emotional difficulties that have led to your eating disorder. The treatment should explore your physical problems, general health matters and eating patterns. Help with eating and simply regaining weight is usually not enough. The more actively you participate in the treatment programme, the greater the chance is of you making a full recovery. No one can get better for you - you need to want to do it, but you will need support.

WILL I RECOVER?

Most people make a full recovery from an eating disorder, but it can take a long time and may be very difficult, but it is possible. Part of you may want to get better while the other part might be very scared about giving up the eating disorder. You are likely to have good days and bad days. At times of stress, eating difficulties may return. To change your ways of thinking and feeling is never easy and it takes time, but it really is worth it.

"Recovery isn't easy, but it is so worthwhile. Hang in there. Believe in yourself. ASK for help and you will begin to see the light at the end of the tunnel."

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Open Monday to Friday 4:30pm - 8:30pm and Saturdays 1:00pm- 4:30pm

beat Helpline 0845 634 1414

Open Monday to Friday 10:30am - 8:30pm and Saturdays 1:00pm - 4:30pm

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