

COPING  
WITH EATING  
DIFFICULTIES

# COPING WITH EATING DIFFICULTIES

## WHAT ARE EATING DIFFICULTIES?

Eating is essential to life. In western societies, most of us have enough to eat and so our relationship with food is no longer about simple survival.

Our personal relationship with food starts when we are babies. Family and social interactions often take place in the context of eating. In this way, food takes on a wealth of social and personal meanings.

For most people, eating is a pleasurable activity. However we are constantly bombarded with images of food, eating and ideal body shapes. This complicates our relationship with food and with our bodies. It is not surprising that many people run into problems, either eating too much or too little, or feeling unhappy with their bodies. Women and men are rarely satisfied with their body shape and most people have been on a diet at some time.

For some people, the concern with eating and their body can become extreme so may develop eating disorders that are damaging or life threatening. It is helpful to understand our eating habits as being on a continuum. At either end are the unhealthy, unhappy, eating habits of anorexia and bulimia and over-eating. In the middle are reasonably healthy, enjoyable eating habits where most people hover for much of the time.

## ANOREXIA

Anorexia describes a condition where a person restricts their eating to the extent that they maintain a very low weight or lose weight dramatically, compared to the standard body weight for their height and age.

A person with anorexia will believe they are fat however thin they seem to the people around them and they may wear baggy clothing to disguise their low weight and to avoid comment. A person with anorexia may restrict themselves to a vegetarian, vegan, low fat, low calorie or detoxification diet or have periods of starving themselves. They may be preoccupied with exercise and running.

### **Anorexia can cause serious physical health problems including:**

- Irregular or missed periods in young women
- Loss of sexual interest and impotence in young men
- Low blood pressure causing dizziness and fainting
- Heart, bowel and kidney problems
- Fits or seizures
- Low bone density leading to brittle bones, osteoporosis or interrupted growth.

### **Anorexia also affects psychological health and may be a factor related to:**

- Disrupted sleep
- Anxiety

- Poor concentration and motivation
- Depression
- Self-harm.

### **Signs of anorexia include:**

- Low body weight
- Distorted body image
- An irrational fear of getting fat.

### **People with a more severe problem may experience:**

- Hair loss and/or growth of downy hair on arms and face
- Loss of muscle on legs and arms and swollen joints
- Protruding eyes
- Low body temperature and constantly feeling cold.

## BINGE EATING

### BINGE EATING AND OVEREATING MAY FOLLOW A PERIOD OF SELF-DENIAL OR DIETING.

Binges are frequently experienced as a loss of control and accompanied by feelings of anxiety, guilt or distress.

The urge to eat to excess may be followed by a desire to purge oneself by vomiting or using laxatives. This is known as bulimia. Frequent vomiting can damage your teeth and the regular use of laxatives may cause bowel problems.

The signs of bulimia may be less obvious than anorexia as weight may remain within the normal range. However friends, family or housemates may notice:

- Binge eating
- Vomiting or always using the toilet after meals
- Eating secretly and hiding food
- Changes in appearance.

"FREQUENT VOMITING CAN DAMAGE YOUR TEETH AND THE REGULAR USE OF LAXATIVES MAY CAUSE BOWEL PROBLEMS."

## WHAT CAUSES EATING DIFFICULTIES?

Eating difficulties often become more noticeable in adolescence, although children frequently express distress by refusing to eat or by comfort eating. Everyone has different attitudes to food and to their bodies and the reasons for eating difficulties will be unique to that particular individual.

**Examples of issues that may contribute to eating difficulties for some people include:**

**Hunger strike >** If a person feels helpless or unable to have any control over their life, the one thing they have control over is how much they eat. Saying no to food can be a way of rejecting the control of others, gaining control over one's life or even gaining control over others.

**Control >** A strict dietary regime can be very reassuring when life seems chaotic or out of control. This is why it can be very tempting to return to an abandoned eating disorder at times of stress or change.

**Achievement and approval >** High achievers and perfectionists are vulnerable to developing eating disorders. They may set impossibly high targets and expect a lot of themselves and others. Restricting food can be a way of achieving a target within their control and a means of gaining approval from others.

**Avoiding growing up >** As a person grows older, they may feel burdened by responsibilities and expectations. To remain thin and childlike can be very tempting. Starvation can delay or interrupt menstruation for girls and postpones the physical process of becoming an adult woman. In a similar way to remaining thin and childlike, being overweight can also provide a barrier against adult relationships and feared intimacy.

**Comfort eating >** There is a close connection between being fed and feeling loved and cared for – starved of affection. When we feel 'empty inside', food can promise to fill the emptiness, particularly foods with strong emotional associations such as sweets, chocolates and puddings. Such food is particularly attractive as it produces a temporary 'high' or sugar 'rush' that lifts our mood.

## HOW YOU CAN HELP YOURSELF

- If you recognise that some of these symptoms may apply to you, you have already taken a big step forward as it can be very hard to recognise and accept that you have eating difficulties.
- Talking to family or friends may be helpful. They may have noticed that something is wrong and it may be a relief for them to know what is happening.
- When you are ready to take action, it is more helpful to learn to manage your own food intake than to let others attempt to control your eating.
- If you are seriously underweight, you may have lost the ability to judge what an adequate amount of food is and you may need professional help to regain some weight.
- Initially, you may prefer to speak to someone you know, such as your personal or senior tutor or a member of staff in your School. They will put you in touch with specialist services, if necessary. You may prefer to approach the Counselling Service or the Students' Union.
- If your difficulties are affecting your academic work, talk to your personal tutor or a member of staff in your School so that they can help you with arrangements for course work or exams.
- There are specialist organisations providing advice, information and support. For further information visit [westminster.ac.uk/counselling](http://westminster.ac.uk/counselling)

"...IT IS MORE HELPFUL TO LEARN TO MANAGE YOUR OWN FOOD INTAKE THAN TO LET OTHERS ATTEMPT TO CONTROL YOUR EATING."

## HOW YOU CAN HELP SOMEONE ELSE

- Often the most helpful thing you can do is to listen. Try not to engage in lengthy discussions about calories or their weight as that may reinforce unhelpful beliefs.
- Be honest about how you feel about their eating disorder. You may have to be patient as the person may not be ready to change their eating behaviour even though they may know it is harmful. There is little point in trying to persuade them to eat/lose weight, until they are ready to make the change.
- Encourage the person to get some help, perhaps by contacting the Counselling Service, the Student Health Service or their GP.
- Do not try to control their eating. It will lead to conflict and they may simply hide their behaviour.
- Encourage them to talk about everyday things and to do normal activities.
- If you think the person is at risk in any way, contact the Counselling Service for help and advice.
- Living with a person who has an eating disorder can be disturbing and frustrating. You may need support yourself. You can contact the Counselling Service for confidential help.

"OFTEN THE MOST HELPFUL THING YOU CAN DO, IS TO LISTEN..."

## WHEN IS SPECIALIST HELP APPROPRIATE?

Many people may diet or comfort eat to relieve anxiety or distress particularly at times of stress such as exams. If this has become a regular pattern or if your eating habits are causing concern to you and/or others, it might be helpful to seek help from a doctor, nurse or counsellor.

Eating difficulties can cause physical and psychological health problems. Your doctor has knowledge and experience and they can offer advice and treatment if necessary. More serious problems may need to be referred to a dietician or to an eating disorders clinic. Your doctor will be able to arrange this for you if necessary.

The **Counselling Service** is another source of help and support. Making changes can be a long process of ups and downs and it is sometimes helpful to have support from someone who is not directly involved in your daily life. A counsellor can help you to understand what is happening and to learn new ways of coping with your feelings without having to starve yourself or binge.

“THERE ARE MANY PEOPLE INSIDE  
AND OUTSIDE OF THE UNIVERSITY,  
TO WHOM YOU CAN TURN TO FOR SUPPORT...”

## WHERE YOU CAN FIND HELP

### INSIDE THE UNIVERSITY

- The **Counselling Service** offers free, confidential, individual and group counselling and workshops to all students. The Service also offers support and guidance, to those concerned about the welfare of a friend or relative. To arrange an initial appointment, telephone 020 7911 5000 ext 66899 or email [counselling@westminster.ac.uk](mailto:counselling@westminster.ac.uk). See webpage [westminster.ac.uk/counselling](http://westminster.ac.uk/counselling) for further information.
- **Disability Learning Support** offer information, support and advice with managing as a student with physical disabilities or mental health conditions. Tel 0203 506 8800 or visit [westminster.ac.uk/disability](http://westminster.ac.uk/disability)
- The **Student Union** offer advice and support. They can be contacted on 020 7911 5000 and at [uwsu.com](http://uwsu.com)
- The **Student Advice Service** offer advice and information on funding, benefits, visa and immigration matters. Contact [studentcentre@westminster.ac.uk](mailto:studentcentre@westminster.ac.uk) or visit [westminster.ac.uk/advice](http://westminster.ac.uk/advice)

## WHERE YOU CAN FIND HELP

### OUTSIDE THE UNIVERSITY

- Your **GP** can offer you support, advice, medical treatment or referral to specialist help. All GP practices offer an out-of-hours service for emergencies.
- **London Nightline** offers a confidential telephone listening service, run by students for students, which is available from 6pm-8am every night during term time. Tel 020 7631 0101.
- **The Samaritans** offer a listening ear 24 hours a day. Tel 116 123; this number is FREE to call.
- Information, resources and links to useful organisations can be found at [www.studentsagainstdepression.org](http://www.studentsagainstdepression.org)

Details of organisations offering specialist help with eating difficulties can be found on the **Counselling Service** webpage: [westminster.ac.uk/counselling](http://westminster.ac.uk/counselling)

### FURTHER READING

- **Anorexia Nervosa – A Survival Guide for Families, Friends and Sufferers**  
(Janet Treasure, Psychology Press, 2000)
- **On Eating**  
(Susie Orbach, Penguin Books, 2002)  
- Offers an alternative way of thinking about eating and advice on ending the cycle of dieting, denial and bingeing
- **Getting Better Bit(e) by Bit(e) – A Survival Kit for Sufferers of Bulimia Nervosa and Binge Eating Disorders**  
(Ulrike Schmidt and Janet Treasure, Psychology Press, 1999)

DETAILS OF OTHER SPECIALIST HELP CAN BE FOUND AT:  
[WESTMINSTER.AC.UK/COUNSELLING](http://WESTMINSTER.AC.UK/COUNSELLING)

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