

Eating Disorders

Anorexia Nervosa &

BULIMIA NERVOSA

Of tremendous concern for young people, particularly young women, the effects of these disorders can be devastating for both sufferers & their families - left untreated both can be fatal.

Anorexia Nervosa is characterized by an intense fear of becoming obese, lack of self-esteem, a distorted body image which leads to self-induced starvation, excessive exercise, obsession with food and calories and, in females, the interruption of the menstrual cycle.

Bulimia Nervosa is characterized by recurrent episodes of binge eating in which the individual feels unable to voluntarily stop eating. These episodes are typically followed by fear, depressed mood, and additional maladaptive methods of weight control including self-induced vomiting, fasting, abuse of laxatives and/or diuretics, and excessive exercise.

Individuals may display behaviours more typical of one of these disorders and then change to display behaviours of the other. They will vacillate between the disorders in an attempt to feel in control of their eating situation.



Characteristics of Sufferers

Those who struggle with an eating disorder experience certain thoughts and feelings surrounding food and weight. The most common include -

- **Control** For many, eating becomes equated with failure. They believe that to assert their will power means they should have control of their body and its appetites. As a result, control and self-discipline become the forces which perpetuate the eating disorder.
- **Fear** For individuals struggling with eating disorders the possibility of gaining weight strikes terror in their hearts. They are also terrorized by their body's normal and natural signals to eat, by their already distorted body image, and by the feelings of failure that come if any weight is gained.
- **Anger** They frequently feel angry with and at their body because it is constantly betraying them. This betrayal comes in the form of the body's desire to maintain a weight above that which the individual wants, the body's signals about being hungry, and in the sense of failure experienced when the person eats or gains weight.
- **Ineffectiveness** Sometimes the individual's measure of their worth or performance is focused on their weight. If they are able to control their weight, then they evaluate themselves as worthy persons. Their weight provides a very clear gauge by which to measure their performance.
- **Perfectionism** Frequently they feel that attaining anything less than excellence means failure, again because they feel their performance reflects upon their worth as persons.

- **Confusion and Guilt** Frequently, for those who struggle to manage their eating, the desire to be thin reflects the need to create a beautiful, intelligent and successful person. Some describe feeling like they are leading a double life because others tell them they possess these qualities, but they themselves do not believe this to be the case. As a result, they feel like impostors.

Overcoming An Eating Disorder

A crucial component in overcoming an eating disorder is to understand that you can learn to eat again - **normalized eating** and that your fears and beliefs surrounding food and weight will gradually dissipate - **changing beliefs**. It is also important to understand the underlying emotional concerns for which the eating disorder serves as a distraction.

Normalized eating means -

- Allowing yourself to eat three meals a day food, not diet food, from all the food groups.
- Eating in response to hunger and learning to stop when you feel full.
- Eating at least 1500 calories a day.

Changing beliefs means -

- Being able to recognize all possible solutions to a problem rather than believing that the only two outcomes are the extremes.
- Establishing trust in your body, learning to believe in yourself (perhaps through therapy), and learning to trust others.
- Recognizing that when other opinions are different than yours, it does not mean that their view is right or better; rather that the two perspectives are simply different.
- Being aware that because something turns out badly once, it does not mean it will always turn out poorly. It is also important to continue to challenge and explore your environment rather than giving into the fear of always encountering a negative outcome.
- Being aware that you may have a tendency to feel that events or situations are causally related when, in fact, no such relationship exists.
- Learning to recognize and attend to your internal, personal feelings. These feelings are physical (like hunger and being full) as well as emotional.



The challenge for those struggling with eating disorders is to learn to anchor their self-esteem in self-awareness and acceptance rather than their weight.

Because eating disorders are multi-determined and multidimensional, it may be important to work with a counsellor to help you sort through all the issues that are underlying the behaviours. There are counsellors who specialize in working with those who struggle to manage their weight and / or eating patterns.

**For confidential assistance
Brown Crawshaw 1.800.668.2055
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