

# Eating disorders

This leaflet addresses some of the issues and feelings related to eating disorders. We all need to eat to live, but for most of us food is much more than a means of surviving. Food can be enjoyable or it can be a source of anxiety, distress and shame.

Weight, eating patterns and diet are common preoccupations in western society today and extreme eating patterns can be seen as nothing unusual. But for an increasing number of individuals, thoughts about food can become obsessive. Often this is related to particular behaviours and rituals connected with food and eating, which may seriously affect a person's physical health as well as causing great emotional distress. It is increasingly recognised that men as well as women may have eating disorders.

## What do we mean by eating disorders?

You will probably have heard of anorexia, bulimia and compulsive eating, which are three fairly common types of behaviour in relation to eating.

**Anorexia** is the name given to a cluster of symptoms relating to severe, sometimes life threatening, weight loss. It is often related to distorted ideas about body weight and size. A person suffering from anorexia persists in thinking they are fat when in reality they are far too thin. It can be linked to a perfectionist attitude – and people suffering from anorexia are often high achievers. Menstrual periods often stop and you may get circulation difficulties and feel cold all the time.

People suffering from **bulimia** have developed a pattern of bingeing – eating excessively large amounts of food and then getting rid of it all by vomiting or purging with laxatives. People with this illness may be of normal weight, so it may be hard for others to realise what is going on. Health implications include tooth decay, dehydration and sometimes serious glandular disturbances.

When people can't control their intake of food we call it **compulsive eating**. Often sufferers find themselves putting on a great deal of weight. Some people resort to strict dieting under these circumstances, which is often ineffective in preventing further weight gain.

**Obesity** refers to a situation when someone is seriously overweight for their height, and can have serious health implications.

**Often the situation is not as clear cut as these definitions suggest.** Some people may starve themselves and vomit. Sufferers from both anorexia and bulimia may develop a pattern of exercising excessively and compulsively. All sufferers from serious eating disorders can become socially isolated because of the compulsive nature of the rituals surrounding food, which may leave little time for other activities. It is also probably true that all sufferers from serious eating disorders feel an underlying sense of shame and self hatred.

## Why do some people develop eating disorders?

Problems with food and eating have complex causes; they are usually related to the way you see yourself and your past experiences. Eating disorders are a way of expressing some difficult feelings – the individual meaning of the behaviour varies from person to person.

Anorexia often develops in adolescence and may be related to managing and controlling the transition to adulthood. A girl with anorexia may not fully develop some of the physical characteristics of an adult woman. Dieting may be seen, unconsciously, as a way of putting off some of the demands of maturity, particularly the sexual ones. However, it can often continue into adult life.

If you are bulimic, the symptoms may have a different meaning. Many people with the illness feel that when they binge and then vomit or purge they feel much better, –for the moment anyway. The vomiting symbolises getting rid of a frightening or horrible feeling.

You may find yourself eating compulsively when you are distressed, anxious or angry. This might be because you feel emotionally 'empty' or because certain worrying or painful feelings are damped down when you eat. We can all eat for comfort when we are unhappy or worried.

## Things you can do to help yourself

- Recognising that you have a problem is the first stage to being able to free yourself from a situation where you feel compelled to use food in a way that worries you
- as far as you can, try to eat a good, balanced diet and get enough rest and exercise; if you feel you have serious difficulties in doing this, and that your health is affected, it might be time to seek help
- try to be receptive if friends and family express concern about your eating or your weight
- if you think you have an eating disorder, talk it over with someone you trust who will help you to clarify your feelings so you feel supported and less alone
- seeing a nutritionist if you want a programme for sensible eating is a way of doing something positive for yourself; They will work out a personal balanced diet for you that is possible to follow for life, not just for a few months; your GP may be able to refer you for help of this kind
- a health adviser can advise you on a healthy eating programme and will also be able to assess what further help you need
- if you find it hard to talk to friends or family, it may help to talk to a counsellor; counselling is private and confidential – it will give you some time and space to think about what is happening, how it is affecting you and what you may want to do about it
- if you are having physical symptoms, e.g., dizziness, raised heartbeat or are worried about your physical health, speak to your GP or a health adviser as soon as possible.

## SilverCloud – Online Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

SilverCloud is available to all registered students and staff, a free online self-help service to help anyone experiencing a variety of emotional challenges.

SilverCloud offers secure, immediate access to online CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) programmes tailored to your specific needs to support you in setting yourself goals, problem

solving and building up your life skills. These programmes have demonstrated high improvement rates for depression and anxiety.

There are currently four programmes available to students and staff:

- Anxious thoughts and feelings
- Depression and low mood
- Stress
- Body image

Sign up to SilverCloud today at:

**[mdxwellbeing.silvercloudhealth.com/signup](http://mdxwellbeing.silvercloudhealth.com/signup)**

## Further help

### BEAT (beating eating disorders)

Helpline: 0808 801 0677

You may be able to join a self help group in which other people share similar problems. GPs can sometimes recommend a suitable local group.

## How to contact the Counselling and Mental Health Service

Please see website for up-to-date service details:

**<http://unihub.mdx.ac.uk/cmh>**

The UniHelp Desk will be happy to tell you where to find the Counselling service or you can contact us at:

**[cmh@mdx.ac.uk](mailto:cmh@mdx.ac.uk)**

## Further leaflets in this series

Abuse

Addictive behaviour

Anxiety and panic