

## EATING DISORDERS

### What are Eating Disorders?

An 'eating disorder' refers to a complex and potentially dangerous condition, which is characterised by extreme disturbances in eating, emotional or psychological distress and physical symptoms.

- Eating disorders are not always primarily about food. Eating disorders can be seen as a means to cope with psychological distress, or are a symptom of underlying problems.
- Eating disorders can affect anyone. An eating disorder is not about food and weight, but also about a person's sense of self.
- People can and do recover from eating disorders. Behaviours characteristic to eating disorders include self-starvation (fasting and/or food restriction), purging (e.g. self-induced vomiting, over-exercising) and bingeing (consuming excessive amounts of food).

### What causes an Eating Disorder?

- There is no single cause which explains why someone may develop an eating disorder. It is usually a combination of factors (biological, psychological, familial and social) that combine to create a circumstance in which an eating disorder is more likely to develop.
- Eating Disorder may develop gradually in response to an upset in a person's life. For example, a traumatic event, a major loss in a person's life, bullying and stress. Sometimes, it there is no obvious trigger.
- Those who have low self-esteem and do not have a strong sense of self may also be vulnerable. People who develop eating disorders are preoccupied with meeting the expectations of other people and are sensitive to other people's opinions. This is eating disorders are so prevalent in adolescence when sense of self is an issue and opinions of peers is so important.

### The Main Eating Disorders

**Anorexia Nervosa** is a condition characterised by an overwhelming drive for thinness and an extreme fear of being or becoming fat. A person will continuously attempt to attain and maintain a body weight lower than the normal body weight for their age, sex and height. They may also engage in excessive exercise and purging.

Warning Signs:

- Extreme dissatisfaction with body shape/weight
- Making excuses for not eating and/or preoccupation with dieting

- Playing with food and/or an obsessive interested in food
- A sudden avoidance of certain foods
- Wearing baggy clothes to hide thinness
- Social withdrawal and mood swings
- Appearance of a fine downy hair covering the back, arms or side of face.

**Bulimia Nervosa** A person will attempt to purge themselves of food they have eaten, sometimes following a binge. A person may engage in risky health behaviours such as prolonged fasting, excessive exercise and self-induced vomiting. The misuse of laxatives and other medications is also common. People with bulimia nervosa often maintain a body weight within the normal body range for their age, sex, and height. Therefore, this eating disorder is harder to notice than anorexia.

**Warning Signs:**

- Fear of gaining weight
- Excessive exercising
- Weight Fluctuation
- Unsociable behaviour
- Black teeth
- Problems with ones throat, oesophagus and stomach

**Binge Eating Disorder** A person will engage in continuous episodes of bingeing without purging. They may gain a considerable amount of weight over time.

Binge eating disorder is more accurately characterized by its emotional symptoms

**Warning Signs**

- Lack of control once one begins to eat.
- Depression.
- Grief.
- Anxiety.
- Shame.
- Disgust or self-hatred about eating behaviours.

**What do you do if any of the above apply to you?**

Make an appointment with [Bodywhys](#) by ringing 1890 200 444 or emailing [alex@bodywhys.ie](mailto:alex@bodywhys.ie).

The Counselling Service will provide you with support in coming to terms with the eating disorder.

Also you can log onto [www.bodywhys.ie](http://www.bodywhys.ie) for more information.

**Eating Disorders in College**

It may be that an issue around eating in school, developed in school years, becomes more prominent in the absence of friends and family. For the some, the change in situation can bring with it new and stressful emotions which you may not know how to cope with. Moving away from home and support

can lead to a sense of anonymity, especially when you are faced large new classes and people. For those who already have disordered eating behaviours the new process of planning meals and choosing food can become a challenge. As with any change, the best way to manage your experience is to get as much information as possible and how to prepare for challenges ahead.

### **HELPFUL TIPS**

- Prepare in advance: Speak with your friends and family and support network about potential problems and how you can plan to deal with them in advance.
- If you think you have an issue and haven't spoken to anyone, it could help to speak to someone before starting college, or find out what supports there are in college for you.
- Try planning meals in advance for the week and do a weekly shop in line with your planned eating.
- If you are sharing a house or a student apartment, consider sharing mealtimes so you are eating with someone.
- If you start to notice changes in your eating habits which are worrying you and you are not happy with, attempt to address this as soon as possible by talking to someone.