

Eating Problems

Images of painfully thin celebrities and models both male and female are around us all the time in the media in newspapers, magazines, billboards, and all other forms. Magazines and television shows imply that being thin brings popularity, success and beauty. Often these images of 'perfect' bodies are digitally altered to give the impression of perceived perfection, but it is very easy to forget that although often distorted these images are fake and the actual person does not look as perfect or glamorous as the picture portrays.

Many people try to emulate the images that they see and sometimes when an individual is experiencing higher levels of stress in their life they start to control the food that they eat, this can lead to one of many forms of eating disorder and can have a significant effect on many aspects of an individual's life. This leaflet aims to explain a little about the various forms of eating problems and to identify some of the support available.

There are 3 commonly experienced eating problems that often have overlaps between them:

- Bulimia Nervosa
- Anorexia Nervosa
- Compulsive Eating

Whatever form the eating disorder takes, it is usually a sign or symptom of an underlying emotional problem or psychological issue.

The underlying issues are not necessarily unusual or traumatic in themselves but they may be fairly commonly experienced problems that have built up over a period of time and have become hard to cope with. The eating problem becomes a way trying to cope, to gain control on the situation.

Bulimia Nervosa

This is a cycle of overeating followed by self-induced vomiting, fasting or purging with laxatives. The eating disorder is often kept secret. The sufferers binge or purge alone and appear 'average' in body size. Those individuals experiencing bulimia are constantly preoccupied with food and body size. They may have lists of high calorie and high carbohydrate foods that are self-forbidden, but these foods also become

binge products. The disorder is often characterised by secrecy, shame and guilt until help is sort and recovery begins. Sufferers from bulimia may experience one or more of the following physical symptoms as well as psychological symptoms:

- Damage to kidneys
- Swollen salivary glands
- Damage to stomach and oesophagus
- Loss of body fluids
- Muscle cramps and weakness
- Fainting spells
- Fits and irregular heartbeat
- Reduced fertility.

The binge can be an automatic response to emotional pain. Often the person feels out of control and unable to resist the urge to binge.

Anorexia Nervosa

Those individuals experiencing anorexia may be completely obsessed with food and diet stringently, denying themselves nutrition. They may be dieting constantly and exercising to lose weight.

The most commonly affected group of people are young women in education aged between 15 – 25 years although anorexia is not limited by age or gender. Individuals with anorexia often suffer from body dysmorphia in that, although they appear very underweight, they see themselves as overweight. Anorexia can be life threatening – some women do starve themselves to death, in the constant belief that they are still overweight. Individuals with anorexia may often experience depressed mood and have very poor self-esteem and body image as well as other psychological issues. They may also binge and purge themselves with food and use laxatives.

Anorexia is very isolating and sufferers may experience the effects of starvation which include:

- Sleep disturbance
- Reduced mental ability
- Excess hair growth on body
- Poor circulation
- Feeling excessively cold
- Fatigue
- Dizzy spells
- Thinning bones possibly leading to deformity and osteoporosis
- Stunted Growth
- Digestive Tract Dysfunction
- Amenorrhagia - A loss of menstrual cycle
- Reduced fertility

Compulsive Eating

This eating problem is identified by an individual's irresistible urge to binge with food. Often after bingeing they may feel overwhelming self-disgust or shame. A binge may follow a period where a strict dieting regime has been in place, thus a diet-binge cycle may commence. An individual's body size may fluctuate and the individual may be concerned by this. Someone who compulsively overeats may often be overweight or feel overweight. The eating is not often in response to physical hunger pangs; they may feel out of control around food. The desire to binge appears to take over and to overpower any desire to diet or to lose weight.

Possible ways to support yourself

- Begin to keep a personal diary – write down your feelings and thoughts, draw pictures or diagrams, use photos if possible. There are no rules about how you use your diary.
- Keep a food diary, this can be helpful in seeing possible patterns in when and why you eat / don't eat.
- Think about what food represents to you – do you use it as a response to emotional pain or worry about what is happening in your life. Could you think of other ways to help with that?
- The eating disorder may have enabled you to cope with difficult circumstances. Perhaps now it is time to see if you can come up with other coping strategies which are less self-damaging.

Learn more about your eating disorder so that you can understand better what is happening in your life. Self-help books are sometimes useful with this; the ones listed below are available at most good retailers.

- Anorexia Nervosa by Janet Treasure
- Overcoming Anorexia Nervosa by C. Freeman and P.Cooper
- Bulimia Nervosa and binge eating by Peter Cooper
- Overcoming binge eating by Chris Fairburn
- Getting Better Bite by Bite – A survival kit for sufferers of bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorders by J.Treasure & U. Schmidt
- Eating Your Heart Out by Julia Buckroyd
- Anorexia Nervosa – A Guide For Sufferers and Their Families by R.L. Palmer

Useful Websites

www.eating-disorders.org.uk - The National Centre for Eating Disorders

www.b-eat.co.uk- b-eat provide information and support through Helplines which people can call, text or email; online support including information, message boards and online support groups; and Helpfinder, an online directory of support services.

Royal College of Psychiatrist's information on Eating Disorders -

<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/problemsdisorders/eatingdisorderskeyfacts.aspx>.

The Centre for Clinical Intervention has developed a number of self-help resources for individuals, many of which are freely available through their website

www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/consumers.cfm.

Further Help

If you can identify with this leaflet and would like to talk about your eating issues then please contact the Student Counselling and Mental Health Service. In one-to-one sessions you can explore and learn to understand the underlying issues in a safe and confidential environment. You can begin to develop different coping strategies, and to learn to manage the obsession with food and body image that might seem to have over-taken your life.

If you are supporting someone with an eating problem and would like to talk about its impact on you, you can also contact the Student Counselling and Mental Health Service. It is not easy supporting someone with an eating problem, it can be very upsetting and draining, especially when whatever you try to say or do does not seem to help very much.

If you think that you would like to talk to someone then please contact the Student Counselling and Mental Health Service via email cmh@worc.ac.uk or phone 01905 54 2832. The Services' web page (www.worc.ac.uk/counselling) gives more information and tells you how to make an appointment.

The Services are located in Woodbury Building on the St John's Campus.