



Eating Disorders

Anorexia Nervosa & Bulimia Nervosa

What are Eating Disorders?

Eating Disorders are characterised by severe disturbances in eating behaviour and an over-evaluation of body image. They are complex problems characterised by an obsession with food, weight and thinness. For people with eating disorders the sense of self-worth is highly contingent on the ability to control weight or body shape. Body image distortion, a disturbance in perception of body shape and weight is an essential feature of both Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa.

Anorexia Nervosa is characterized by a refusal to maintain a minimally normal body weight. People with anorexia starve themselves, eating fewer calories than their bodies need to function.

Bulimia Nervosa is characterized by repeated episodes of binge eating followed by inappropriate compensatory behaviours such as self-induced vomiting; misuse of laxatives, diuretics or other medications; fasting; or excessive exercise.

An **Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified** category is used for eating disorders that meet some but not all criteria for a specific Eating Disorder.

What are some of the warning signs of Eating Disorders?

Some warning signs of anorexia or bulimia include the following:

- Deliberate self-starvation with weight loss.
- Fear of gaining weight.
- A self-perception of being fat when the person is really too thin.
- Severely restricting the kinds of food or amount of food that will be eaten.
- Denial of hunger.
- Constant exercising.
- Unusual behaviour towards food eg collecting recipes, preparing impressive meals for other people, or cutting their food into little pieces and then pushing it around their plate.
- Secretive about eating, not wanting to eat with others.
- Absent or irregular periods.
- Purging behaviours immediately after meals (vomiting, using laxatives).

What are the problems caused by Anorexia?

Girls with anorexia usually stop or don't start having menstrual periods. They have a hard time concentrating and are always thinking about food. It is not true that people with anorexia are never hungry. Actually, they are always hungry. Feeling hunger gives them a feeling of control over their lives and their bodies. It makes them feel like they are good at something – they are good at losing weight. Anorexia can lead to harmful and potentially life threatening conditions including starvation, heat problems, brittle bones, and may affect a girl's future ability to have children. People with severe anorexia may be at risk of death from organ failure. People with bulimia damage the enamel on their teeth if they are vomiting and risk heart failure. The most lethal combination is where a person at very low weight is also purging.

Signs to watch out for

Severe weight loss is always a cause for concern. It may, of course indicate that the person has a physical illness. In young people, in their early or late teens, it may suggest that they have developed anorexia. The person who does not wish to eat meals with the family, who seems to have become very interested in reading about or discussing diets, in cooking for and feeding others but not eating, and losing weight, may have developed anorexia. Other signs are that her periods may stop, exercise is taken excessively and mood may be very changeable. The person may complain about being 'fat', wear baggy clothes and feel cold.

What is the difference between Anorexia and Bulimia?

People with anorexia starve themselves, avoid high-calorie foods and exercise constantly. People with bulimia purge soon after eating. They often vomit and/or take laxatives or diuretics (water pills) to keep from gaining weight. Because they are bingeing people with bulimia usually look as if they are at a healthy weight. People with anorexia may also purge but their focus is on restricting food intake.

Treatment

Treatment of anorexia nervosa is difficult and requires input from skilled professionals. Anorexia is not the sort of problem that can just be ignored in the hope that it will go away or that the affected person will grow out of it. People who suffer from bulimia are more able to disguise it and may go for years before they consider treatment.

Eating disorders are conditions in which there are considerable variations in severity, making simple generalisations about treatment impossible. The return to health usually focuses on restoration of healthy eating and addressing body image disturbances.