

# YOUNG MINDS

The voice for young people's mental health and wellbeing

**WORRIED ABOUT  
EATING PROBLEMS  
AND DISORDERS**



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## WHAT THIS BOOKLET TELLS YOU

**This booklet will help you if you want to know more about eating problems and disorders such as anorexia and bulimia.**

### **It includes information about:**

- What eating problems and disorders are
- Why people get eating problems and disorders
- How to cope with eating problems and disorders
- What other young people have found helpful about in-patient units
- How friends and family can help
- Some useful contact numbers

# 12

**teenagers suffer  
from eating problems**





## WHAT ARE EATING PROBLEMS AND DISORDERS?

Everybody needs to eat to live – food is a very important part of our lives. We all like different foods and need different amounts of food. Just as people have different hair colour, we also have different bodies, heights, bone structures and builds. Body fat is stored in different places in our bodies, due to our genes. It is most important to have a healthy body weight (and a certain amount of body fat) to keep our bodies working.

Most people are unhappy with their bodies some of the time – thinking they are too fat, too thin, or just the wrong shape. This can be especially true for teenagers whose bodies are changing a lot, often very quickly. These worries will generally pass with time.

Many people try out diets and usually this is not a problem. However, sometimes, eating patterns can become unhealthy, for example if you eat too much or too little because you are feeling unhappy or stressed. It can be easier to control the way you eat than to cope with painful feelings. Over time, this can become dangerous to your emotional and physical health.

There are different kinds of eating problems and disorders – some are more serious than others. All eating difficulties are worrying. It's when you or your friends or family become troubled by your eating habits, if you are losing weight and thinking



about it all the time that it becomes an eating problem. It's important to talk about your worries and feel supported as if left alone, your worries and eating problems may continue and get worse. You may get help and support from parents, friends, school or college counsellors, or your GP.

For some young people, their eating problems become more serious and extreme. Either not eating or over-eating builds up and persists over many months so that their physical health, and in some cases even their lives, can be put at high risk. Their everyday life at home and in school may well be seriously disrupted. These young people are not well, either physically or emotionally. It is when eating problems like this reach a disturbing level that specialists use the term eating disorders – the most severe disorders being called anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa.

Sometimes people use these terms to cover all kinds of eating problems. The shorter terms anorexia and bulimia (or anorexic and bulimic) are more appropriately used for the less extreme though still worrying eating problems – for example a loss of appetite which may primarily have a physical cause.

Eating problems and disorders are more common in girls but is becoming more common in boys too. People from all backgrounds and all ages can suffer.

**Eating problems and disorders are not just about food, they are about feelings.**



*“I started a diet. When I lost the amount of weight I wanted to I felt a sense of achievement so continued to lose weight. I come to the hospital to help me get over anorexia.”*

*“I was tired and everything but I liked what I was seeing when I looked in the mirror, I couldn't see it as being a problem.”*

## **ANOREXIA**

If you have anorexia, you might think about food, fat content or calories all the time and try to avoid eating. Losing weight might make you feel in control, or give you a sense of success which makes you feel good, but it can be difficult to know when to stop.

Your body needs a certain amount of nutrition to keep it working. If you are not getting enough nutrition, you become tired, and find it difficult to concentrate or think. If you judge yourself on how much you eat, you might feel that you will never be good enough unless you lose more weight – it can make you feel bad about yourself. Often, people with anorexia still feel fat even though they are really very thin.

**10%** of all people with eating disorders are male

## SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF ANOREXIA

If you have anorexia, you might have some of the following symptoms. The more symptoms you have and the more persistent and extreme they become, the more likely it is you may be suffering from anorexia nervosa (ie. a serious eating disorder).

- Loss of a lot of weight very quickly
- Eating less and less
- Feeling panicky if you have to eat a big meal
- Thinking about food all the time, maybe wanting to cook for others
- Comparing yourself with other people's body size
- Loss of periods, or periods not starting in girls
- Being moody or down
- Trying to be perfect
- Feeling cold
- Not feeling like mixing with people
- Thinking you are fatter than you actually are
- Sleeping problems
- Growth of downy body hair
- Teeth problems through being sick a lot



*“One night I ate loads when my parents were out. I felt really disgusted with myself, and terrified I’d end up like a hippo. I took an overdose because I hated myself. I went to hospital and had my stomach pumped, it was horrible.”*

## BULIMIA

People with bulimia usually keep their weight steady, so it can be very hard to tell if someone has bulimia. However, they still think constantly about food and calories. As with anorexia, bulimia is a way of using food to cope with painful feelings – sometimes people can have symptoms of both disorders. Some people have had anorexia in the past, but become bulimic.

People with bulimia ‘binge-eat’ – they eat a lot of food very quickly. This makes them feel guilty and bad about themselves, so they might try and get rid of the food by making themselves sick, or taking lots of laxatives (tablets or medicine that make you go to the toilet a lot). Some people feel so bad that they harm themselves, or misuse alcohol or drugs.

People with bulimia might get stuck in a cycle of bingeing when they feel upset or stressed, then punishing themselves by vomiting, starving themselves or taking laxatives. While they might seem like they are coping on the outside, inside they feel lonely and scared – like no-one can understand their problem.



## SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF BULIMIA

Bingeing and vomiting can in the long run do serious harm to the body. If you have bulimia, you might get some of the following symptoms. Again, the more symptoms you have and the more persistent and extreme they become, the more likely it is that you may be suffering from bulimia nervosa (ie. a serious eating disorder).

- Binge-eating
- Sore throat and mouth infections
- Dehydration, and poor skin
- Sleeping problems
- Heart problems
- Muscle spasms (especially from using too many laxatives)
- Bad teeth (from being sick)
- Going to the toilet after meals
- Changes in periods if you are a girl
- Swollen glands
- Isolating yourself
- Feeling helpless



*“When there’s been an argument and you’re all sitting down at the table and there’s an atmosphere, you feel like any slight noise is going to disturb somebody and you just feel uncomfortable...it used to feel like that at dinner, and I think that’s what made it a struggle, especially because nobody was talking... so you were always thinking, oh food’s in front of me, food, calories, fattening, yuk.”*

## WHY DO PEOPLE GET EATING PROBLEMS AND DISORDERS?

It’s good to want to be a healthy weight so our bodies can work well. However, sometimes what you think about food can get muddled up with what you think and feel about yourself. If things are going wrong in your life sometimes it can go wrong in how you treat your body.

Some of the reasons people get eating problems and disorders include:

- Feeling out of control – you might feel like your body is the only thing you have control over
- Wanting to be popular – thinking if you are slim you will be more attractive to other people
- Knowing parents who worry about their own weight and diet
- Wanting to be like other people who are successful eg. Models in magazines – confusing slimness with success
- Carrying on without eating much after an illness (eg.flu), even though the illness has gone
- Starting a diet but not being able to stop
- Not realising that a bit of body fat is normal and needed for health!



- Feeling you aren't good enough – thinking that everything will be better if you are thinner
- Hating your body – this might be because something bad has happened to you, for example, if you have been abused

## **WAYS OF COPING WITH EATING PROBLEMS AND DISORDERS**

People with anorexia or bulimia may not accept that they have a problem, and may hide the fact they are not eating. They may lie about what they eat, or refuse any help. Sometimes though, this hides their feelings of fear about what is happening to them. Once they accept that they have a problem, there is a lot of help available!

It can be really hard to cope with an eating problem or disorder on your own. Talking to someone might help you feel more able to cope. Try and talk to someone you like and trust, such as a....

- Friend
- Brother or sister
- Grandparents
- Parent or carer
- Aunt or uncle
- Friend's parent



*“If you can't get better at home then you have to go in...I do agree in having to get admitted to places because sometimes, like...if someone hadn't made me eat I wouldn't have eaten.”*

*“Having 24 hour support... just seeing the doctor because she's really experienced and she knows what to say to make things clearer. Sometimes I don't even tell her how I feel... she just puts it across that you can do it.”*

*“The psychiatrist listened, and I got more say in what was happening...and he helped my mum and dad understand it.”*

## **Other people you could talk to could be your....**

- Teacher or College Tutor
- School/Youth/Student counsellor
- Connexions Adviser
- School nurse
- Youth worker

You could also go to your doctor who should be sympathetic and listen to you. They may be able to prescribe some medicines which will help you or they may refer you to specialist professionals such as psychiatrists, psychologists or psychotherapists or youth counsellor.

What you tell the doctor will be confidential – they should not tell anyone what you tell them, unless your health or safety is at serious risk. Then your doctor must tell your parent or carer.

If you speak to a counsellor or therapist, or specialist professional, they will be very sympathetic to your worries. They will give you some time to think about your feelings, and eating problems. They are trained and will be interested to learn more from you about how you feel and what you think about yourself. They respect confidentiality, and if you want to, may meet you with family members.

You may also be referred to a dietician who can tell you about how your eating habits affect your body, and help you regain a healthy eating pattern.

In most cases, you will be seen as an out-patient, perhaps based at a hospital or adolescent in-patient unit. Sometimes, if your weight is dangerously low and you are diagnosed as having anorexia nervosa, you may have to stay in hospital.

For a minority of young people a stay in an in-patient unit with other young people can be helpful. While this might sound frightening, it can give you a chance to talk to trained staff, and some time to work through your difficulties.

*“I was really nervous when I came into the unit and I wouldn’t talk to the staff, and I wouldn’t talk to the other patients, but now I’m really involved with it, I’m having a laugh at my dinner time, I sometimes even look forward to my food, which I really thought would never happen.”*

*“At the time I didn’t want anything to happen and I thought I was alright, but I realise now that if it had [been alright] I wouldn’t have got this bad.”*

**20%**

**of young women diet either  
all or some of the time**

It can be really difficult to admit that you need help, even to yourself, but the earlier that you try and get some help, the easier it will be to recover.

For more information, or support, try some of the places at the end of this booklet.

## **FRIENDS AND FAMILY – WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP?**

Support from friends and family can be essential for people struggling to get over an eating problem or disorder. However, it can be difficult to know how to help, especially if the person with the eating problem or disorder is not yet ready to face their difficulties. You might feel helpless, and their rejection might put pressure on your relationship with them.



## **Things you can do to help if you think a friend might have an eating problem or disorder:**

- Give them time, and listen
- Encourage them to seek help – it is important for them to get medical advice
- Let them know you are worried, and that you are there for them
- Remind them why you like and value them
- Include them in activities, even if they have not been joining in with things
- Get some information on eating problems and disorders (some of the places listed at the end can help with this)
- If you are worried, or finding it difficult to cope with on your own, talk to an adult that you trust, or contact one of the places in the help section at the end of this section
- Make sure you look after yourself as well!

## **Some things to avoid:**

- Don't take responsibility for your friend's problems
- Don't feel guilty – it's not your fault
- Don't change your own eating habits – it's important that your friend is reminded of healthy eating habits
- Don't give up – even though your friend may push you away or tell you to mind your own business. **Stay interested**

## WHO CAN HELP?

If may help to contact some of these places:

### BEAT

103 Prince of Wales Road, Norwich NR1 1DW

Helpline: .....0845 634 1414

Mon-Fri 10.30am-8.30pm, Sat 1.00pm-4.30pm

Sun-closed & Bank Holidays 11.30am-2.30pm

Email: .....help@b-eat.co.uk

Youthline: .....0845 634 7650

Mon-Fri 4.30pm-8.30pm, Sat 1.00pm-4.30pm

Sun-closed & Bank Holidays 11.30am-2.30pm

Text: .....07786 201 820

Email: .....fyp@b-eat.co.uk

Website: .....b-eat.co.uk

Support and information for people with eating problems or disorders and their carers through telephone helplines, a network of self-help groups and newsletters.

## **CHILDLINE**

Helpline: .....0800 1111  
Textphone: .....0800 400 222  
Mon-Fri 9.30am-9.30pm & 11am-8pm Weekends  
Living away from home: .....0800 88 44 44  
Monday-Friday 3.30pm-9.30pm & 11am-8pm Weekends  
Website: [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

ChildLine is the UK's free helpline for children and young people. It provides a confidential telephone counselling service for any child with any problem.

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## **YOUTH ACCESS**

1-2 Taylors Yard, 67 Alderbrook Road, London SW12 8AD  
Tel: .....020 8772 9900  
Fax: .....020 8772 9746  
Email: .....[admin@youthaccess.org.uk](mailto:admin@youthaccess.org.uk)  
Website: .....[www.youthaccess.org.uk](http://www.youthaccess.org.uk)

Provides information advice about counselling services throughout the UK for young people aged 12-25 years. Can give details of appropriate local agencies for young people. Can contact by letter, telephone, fax or email

## GET CONNECTED

Tel: .....0808 808 4994

7 days a week 1-11pm

Web chat 7pm-10pm

Email: .....help@getconnected.org.uk

Website: .....www.getconnected.org.uk

This service provides a unique, free and confidential helpline for young people, acting as a signpost to relevant sources of help.

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## THERE4ME

Website: .....www.achance2talk.com

Email support service for young people between 12-16 years.

There's on-screen advice about all sorts of things e.g. bullying, relationship, exams, drugs, difficulties at home, to name just a few. Or you can send an e-letter to Sam their agony aunt. If you would prefer a confidential private session you can talk 1-2-1 in 'real time' with an NSPCC adviser or email for a reply within 24 hours.

You don't have to say who you are— you stay in control.

## **YOUTH2YOUTH**

Helpline: .....020 8896 3675

Email & Online chat via website Mon & Thurs 6.30pm-9.30pm

Website: .....[www.youth2youth.co.uk](http://www.youth2youth.co.uk)

For people under 19 years. Confidential and anonymous email and telephone helpline support run by young volunteers. Offers sympathetic listening and information about practical help.

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## **NSPCC**

NSPCC Helpline, 42 Curtain Road, London EC2A 3NH

Helpline for children and young people: 0800 1111

Helpline for adults: .....0808 800 5000

Textphone: .....0800 056 0566

Email: .....[help@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:help@nspcc.org.uk)

Website: .....[www.nspcc.org.uk](http://www.nspcc.org.uk)

Has a child protection helpline for any child or adult concerned about a child at risk of abuse. The NSPCC also provides services to help families overcome abuse, and produces publications on general parenting.

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## **NHS DIRECT**

Helpline: .....0845 46 47

Website: .....[www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)

Gives confidential advice and information on any health issue, medication, self-help groups and information about the NHS.

## **YOUNGMINDS**

48-50 St John Street  
London EC1M 4DG

**Tel:** 020 7336 8445

**Fax:** 020 7336 8446

**Email:** [yemenquiries@youngminds.org.uk](mailto:yemenquiries@youngminds.org.uk)

**Website:** [www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)

**YoungMinds  
Parents Helpline:**  
0808 802 5544

**YoungMinds  
Parents Forum:**  
[www.shareyourstory.org.uk](http://www.shareyourstory.org.uk)

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