



 **DUT**
DURBAN
UNIVERSITY OF
TECHNOLOGY

Department of
student
counselling
and health

what are
eating disorders?

Understanding Eating Disorders

Eating disorders involve a disturbance in eating behaviour. There are several types of eating disorders. The three most common eating disorders are Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia Nervosa and Binge Eating Disorder. All these three disorders show signs of an abnormal and unhealthy relationship with food and eating.

Eating disorders do not discriminate between gender, class, race or age. This means anyone can be affected by an eating disorder.

Types & Symptoms of Eating Disorders

Anorexia nervosa

Anorexia nervosa is a disorder which makes eating very distressing. It is characterised by a persistent pursuit of thinness and an unwillingness to maintain a normal or healthy weight.

Other methods apart from starvation may be utilised to maintain low weight, such as over exercising, vomiting or purging.

A person with anorexia nervosa may exhibit the following symptoms:

- Inadequate food intake leading to a weight that is clearly too low.
- Intense fear of weight gain or of becoming fat, persistent behaviour to prevent weight gain.
- Self-esteem overly related to body image.

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Bulimia Nervosa

Bulimia Nervosa involves consuming excessively large quantities of food, without regard for hunger, and followed by purging. Purging can include self-induced vomiting, laxatives and excessive exercise.

A person with bulimia nervosa may exhibit the following symptoms:

- Eating in discrete period of time (e.g. within any 2-hour period) an amount of food that is definitely larger than most individuals.
- A sense of lack of control over eating during the episode (e.g. feeling that one cannot stop eating or control what or how one is eating).
- Recurrent inappropriate compensatory behaviours to prevent weight gain, such as self-induced vomiting, misuse of laxatives, diuretics, or other medications; fasting; or excessive exercise
- Self-evaluation overly related to body image.

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Binge Eating Disorder

Binge eating disorder is characterised by compulsive overeating in which the individual consume large amounts of food. There is an immediate sense of relief at having given up the struggle to not eat, but this is soon replaced by feelings of shame guilt and disgust. There is no use of compensatory measures to counter the binge eating. A person may exhibit the following symptoms:

- Eating in discrete period of time (e.g. within any 2-hour period) an amount of food that is definitely larger than most individuals.
- A sense of lack of control over eating during the episode (e.g. feeling that one cannot stop eating or control what or how one is eating).
- The binge eating is not associated with recurrent use of inappropriate compensatory behaviour as in bulimia nervosa

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Factors contributing to Eating Disorders

While eating disorders may first appear to be solely about food and weight preoccupations, those suffering from them often try to use food and the control of food to cope with feelings and emotions that may otherwise seem overwhelming.

Psychological Factors:

- Low self-esteem
- Feelings of inadequacy or lack of control in life
- Depression, anxiety, anger, stress or loneliness

Interpersonal Factors:

- Troubled personal relationships
- Difficulty expressing emotions and feelings
- History of being teased or ridiculed based on size or weight
- History of physical or sexual abuse

Social Factors:

- Cultural pressures that glorify "thinness" or muscularity and place value on obtaining the "perfect body"
- Narrow definitions of beauty that include only women and men of specific body weights and shapes
- Cultural norms that value people on the basis of physical appearance and not inner



qualities and strengths

- Stress related to racial, ethnic, size/weight-related or other forms of discrimination or prejudice

Biological Factors:

- Scientists are still researching possible biochemical or biological causes of eating disorders. In some individuals with eating disorders, certain chemicals in the brain that control hunger, appetite, and digestion have been found to be unbalanced. The exact meaning and implications of these imbalances remain under investigation
- Eating disorders often run in families. Current research indicates that there are significant genetic contributions to eating disorders.

Tips to help with overcoming an eating disorder

Below are some recommendations that might help along the journey of recovering from an eating disorder.

Keep a 'recovery journal'

Fill it with positive and affirming thoughts. Write about why you want to recover and how the eating disorder has impacted your life.

Spend time around supportive people

Try to find people who are comfortable with their bodies and don't spend all their time talking about dieting and food.

Talk to other people who are recovering/ have recovered

Mutual support can be motivating, and seeing someone else make progress or enjoying life might help to keep you inspired too. Support groups can be a really great way of seeking support from people going through similar things.

Take up a hobby

Try something new, or go back to something you used to love.

Manage stress

One of the most important aspects of controlling an eating disorder is to find alternate ways to handle stress and other overwhelming feelings without using food. These may include exercising, meditating, using sensory relaxation strategies, and practicing simple breathing exercises.

Avoid temptation

You're much more likely to overeat if you have junk food, desserts, and unhealthy snacks in the house. Remove the temptation by clearing your fridge and cupboards of your favourite binge foods.

Keep a food diary

Write down what you eat, when, how much, and how you're feeling when you eat. You may see

patterns emerge that reveal the connection between your moods and eating.

Listen to your body

Learn to distinguish between physical and emotional hunger. If you ate recently and don't have a rumbling stomach, you're probably not really hungry.

Remind yourself that "true beauty" is not simply skin-deep. When you feel good about yourself and who you are, you carry yourself with a sense of confidence, self-acceptance, and openness that makes you beautiful regardless of whether you physically look like a super model. Beauty is a state of mind, not a state of your body.

Seek professional help

The support of trained professionals can help you regain your health, learn to eat normally again, and develop healthier attitudes about food and your body.

How to Help a Friend

If you are worried about a friend's eating behaviours or attitudes, it is important to express your concerns in a loving and supportive way.

- ♦ Set a time to talk. Set aside a time for a private, respectful meeting with your friend to discuss your concerns openly and honestly in a caring, supportive way. Make sure you will be some place away from other distractions.
- ♦ Communicate your concerns. Share your memories of specific times when you felt concerned about your friend's eating or exercise behaviors. Explain that you think these things may indicate that there could be a problem that needs professional attention.
- ♦ Ask your friend to explore these concerns with a counselor, doctor, nutritionist, or other health professional who is knowledgeable about eating issues. If you feel comfortable doing so, offer to help your friend make an appointment or accompany your friend on their first visit.
- ♦ Avoid conflicts or a battle of the wills with your friend. If your friend refuses to acknowledge that there is a problem or any reason for you to be concerned, restate your feelings and the reasons for them and leave yourself open and available as a supportive listener.
- ♦ Avoid placing shame, blame, or guilt on your friend regarding their actions or attitudes. Do not use accusatory "you" statements like, "You just need to eat." Or, "You are acting irresponsibly." Instead, use "I" statements. For example: "I'm concerned about you because you refuse to eat breakfast or lunch." Or, "It makes me afraid to hear you vomiting."
- ♦ Avoid giving simple solutions. For example, "If you'd just stop, then everything would be fine!"
- ♦ Express your continued support. Remind your friend that you care and want him/her to be healthy and happy.

Should you seek for professional help?

Self-Assessment Questionnaire



Do you?	Yes	No
Think about food and weight constantly		
Feel frustrated with dieting		
Eat in response to anger, boredom, anxiety, stress, loneliness, etc		
Feel guilty and remorse when you overeat		
Eat when you are not hungry		
Attempt to control your weight by fasting, vomiting, taking laxatives or exercising		
Feel anxious, guilty or empty if you miss your exercise time or deny yourself food if you missed exercise		
Think of the time spent exercising in terms of how many calories you burn		
Feel unworthy because your body is not in the right shape or weight		
Have a range of sizes in your wardrobe		
Wear clothes that divert attention from your weight		
Avoid looking in full-length mirrors		
Believe that if you stop concentrating on controlling your weight, you will become fat?		

If you have identified 5 or more of these you may need to seek for professional help. Visit the Student Counselling Centre: Lower Library Complex, Steve Biko Campus or call 031 373 2266.

Note: the above does not necessarily mean that you have an eating disorder. It could mean that you might be at risk.

Referencing

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