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Understanding Different Types of Eating Disorders

Can you imagine what it's like to live each day feeling like food is your enemy or constantly worrying about your body shape and size? For many people with eating disorders, this is a reality. Their thoughts, actions, and feelings are centred around food, weight and body image. What have you eaten? What will you eat? When will you eat next? How much will you need to exercise? Will you be able to notice that you have eaten something when you look in the mirror? It's these kinds of inner narratives that someone with unhealthy relationships with food, body image, and exercise experiences every day.

Eating disorders are far more common than most people realize, and they can have serious impacts on both physical and mental health. Whether it's from social media, magazines, or peer pressure, the pressure to look a certain way can push people—especially teens—towards unhealthy habits in an attempt to achieve unrealistic and unsustainable lifestyles. Eating disorders are not just about food; they're about self-worth. When someone is feeling vulnerable because externalized messages about how they look are everywhere in their environment, their thoughts become dominated by distorted actions, influencing their mental health.

In this article, we'll help you develop improved awareness of the signs of eating disorders and offer ways to support those who struggle with them. We'll explore the different types of eating

disorders, debunk some common myths and offer some perspectives that can help you support loved ones, encourage them to seek help early and work towards recovery.

What are eating disorders, and how do they affect you?

Eating disorders are mental health conditions that involve unhealthy relationships with food, body image and exercise. They are connected to emotional and psychological challenges where people may begin to have concerns about their appearance that can quickly spiral into harmful patterns that affect how they think about food, weight and their bodies. It's essential to recognize that eating disorders are "serious health conditions"¹ and "bio-psycho-social diseases, which means that genetic, biological, environmental, and social elements all play a role."² People do not choose to develop eating disorders. Unlike temporary focuses on dieting or weight loss, eating disorders reflect someone's ongoing struggles with control around food or exercise. The effects can be severe. Physical health risks can include malnutrition, heart and digestive problems. Emotionally, they lead to depression, anxiety and social isolation. People experiencing an eating disorder need professional attention to help them find a healthier path forward.

Understanding different types of eating disorders

There are several types of eating disorders, each with unique symptoms and challenges. The three most common are anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge-eating disorder.

Anorexia Nervosa

People with anorexia nervosa have an intense fear of gaining weight, which often leads them to restrict their food intake and experience severe weight loss. Someone with anorexia may avoid eating in public, be focused on limiting their caloric intake, partake in excessive exercise or even demonstrate obsessive-compulsive symptoms such as being “preoccupied with constant thoughts about food” or “obsessively collect recipes or hoard food.”³ Over time, they can damage their heart, experience bone loss, have brittle hair and nails, and even develop infertility.

Bulimia Nervosa

Bulimia involves episodes where someone binge-eats and then takes action to avoid weight gain. This can include vomiting, fasting, using laxatives, or engaging in extreme exercise. People with bulimia may maintain a typical or average weight, which can make it difficult to recognize.⁴ However, with the cycles of bulimia, people often develop serious problems with dehydration, digestive issues and even dental problems because of the frequent vomiting.

Binge-Eating Disorder

This disorder involves someone regularly consuming large amounts of food in a short amount of time, often so quickly that it leads to discomfort and subsequent feelings of guilt or shame. Unlike bulimia, binge-eating disorder does not include purging behaviours to undo the calories they consume. The loss of control someone experiencing this disorder can feel may lead to secretive eating behaviour and a tendency to consume highly processed foods. In turn, this can lead to health challenges such as obesity, heart disease, Type 2 Diabetes, and digestive issues.

There are also some less common types of eating disorders, such as ARFID and Pica.

Avoidant Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID)

This disorder is often seen in younger children who lack interest in eating or have an aversion to smells, tastes, colours, textures, and food temperatures.⁵ It often leads to restriction of food that prevents enough calories or nutrients from being consumed. People with ARFID may be viewed as extremely picky eaters or even avoid eating with others. In extreme instances, nutrient deficiencies can lead to a dependence on supplements or even tube feeding.

Pica

Pica is a condition in which someone begins to eat things that are not considered food such as: ice, dirt, soil, chalk, soap, paper, hair, cloth, wool or pebbles.⁶ Consuming these non-food substances is not part of their culture's religious ceremonies or standard practices. Pica can lead to poisoning, nutritional deficiencies, digestive system injuries and infections.

Five common myths about eating disorders

1. Eating disorders only affect young women.

The truth is that they affect people of all genders, ages and backgrounds.⁷

2. It's just about wanting to be thin, or it's just about food.

While body image may play a role, eating disorders are complex mental health issues often driven by psychological issues like anxiety, perfectionism, or traumatic experiences. They are rooted in control and emotional pain and not just about appearance.

3. You can tell by looking at someone that they have an eating disorder.

People with eating disorders can have any body size. They can be underweight, overweight, or present as typical. It really depends on the nature of the eating disorder and individual factors.

4. It's a choice.

Eating disorders are serious illnesses that require treatment. Someone experiencing an eating disorder may need hospitalization, medical care, therapy or a combination of all of these.

5. Once someone gains weight, they're cured.

A person who is in recovery related to an eating disorder is focused on healing the mind and body. In some cases, gaining weight can be one aspect of treatment, but this is a dangerous stereotype.



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The role of psychological and environmental factors

Eating disorders are often caused by a mix of psychological and environmental factors and don't just happen spontaneously.

Having low self-esteem, anxiety, being focused on perfectionism, or unaddressed trauma often play a role in someone's struggle with feeling not good enough. They are usually responses that develop in response to stressful life events or underlying mental health issues.⁸

Cultural and social pressures are also strong contributors. Being surrounded by pressures to achieve unrealistic beauty standards that are prevalent day to day, presented through mainstream media and social media, can push some people towards unhealthy behaviours in an attempt to conform to societal expectations and peer pressure. Research has suggested that "one of the strongest predictors of eating disorders among girls... is the value peers place on weight and eating."⁹ Behaviours that may develop include constantly comparing oneself to others, constantly seeking a sense of control, being hypersensitive to negative emotions, and having an overdeveloped interest in calories, fats, and micronutrient breakdowns of food. These are signs of someone's increased risk of developing an eating disorder.

However, studies of family dynamics and childhood experiences or relationships with food from a young age can also influence views of food and body image and introduce stress. There may even be a genetic link as "people who have a family member with an eating disorder face a much greater risk of developing one themselves" and they are "7 to 12 [times] more likely to develop anorexia or bulimia if they have a relative with an eating disorder."¹⁰

Economic realities such as the high cost of food, food insecurity or scarcity can also influence people's behaviours. When "adults... experience significant food deprivation on a regular basis [they] are more likely to engage in several disordered eating behaviors."¹¹ Food insecurity intersects with people who have low income or are unemployed, people of colour, where someone lives, and age. Many older adults and children cannot obtain nutritious meals and go hungry. When food sources become available, they may develop eating patterns that "can progress into a fully developed eating disorder."¹²

Identifying warning signs and when to seek help

Being able to recognize the warning signs of an eating disorder can make a big difference in helping someone get the support they need. Here are some common things to watch for:

- **Physical signs** – drastic shifts in weight, frequent illness, changes in skin or hair health

- **Behavioural signs** – being preoccupied with food, showing extreme eating behaviours, excessive exercise, skipping meals, withdrawing from social activities, eating secretively, obsessing about appearance

- **Emotional signs** – mood swings, anxiety, depression, irritability, sleep disruptions/disturbances, lack of energy

If you notice signs in yourself or someone else, consider reaching out for help. Talking to a doctor, therapist, or nutritionist/Registered Dietician can give you insight into treatment options and offer better chances of recovery. For Canadians, resources like the National Eating Disorder Information Centre (NEDIC) <https://nedic.ca> provides a toll-free helpline for assistance.

Homewood Health offers a specialized Eating Disorder Program, Canada's largest inpatient treatment resource for individuals 16 and older. You can view an interview with Psychiatrist JD Vanderkooy, Medical Director of the program, who discusses some common barriers to treatment as well as treatment options here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5nW-Y1f5-Jo>

Supporting a loved one with an eating disorder

It can be difficult to know how to help someone who is struggling with an eating disorder. Here are a few tips:¹³

- Avoid making judgements or giving unsolicited advice. Instead, focus on listening.
- Compassionate language can be a powerful way to show support. Avoid discussing weight, appearance, and food choices since these topics can all be triggering.
- Encourage open conversations that are comfortable, unconditional, and supportive so that they feel okay sharing their feelings. Help them understand that you are there for them no matter how long the recovery process takes.

The benefits of early intervention and treatment

The earlier someone gets help for an eating disorder, the better their chances are for a full recovery. Delaying treatment can have serious consequences. For example, many people "begin treatment 4 years after initial disorder onset. For some, even up to 10 years. This delay in treatment allows the eating disorder to worsen. In fact, eating disorders have the highest death rate of any mental health illness. Therefore, delaying treatment increases the possibility of harm."¹⁴ Help usually involves a combination of therapies that could include:

- Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)
- family-based therapy
- medical supervision
- structured inpatient programs like those offered at Homewood Health
- and nutritional counselling

The goal of treatment is to help people challenge distorted thinking about food and their body image so they can develop a healthier relationship with food and ensure their physical and mental well-being is considered as they recover. With the proper support and treatment, recovery is possible.


Eating disorders' effect on overall well-being

Recovering from an eating disorder improves physical health, energy levels, immunity, and nutrition. It also helps develop better mental well-being and emotional resilience by promoting self-esteem, reducing anxiety and depression, and creating a positive body image.

Raising awareness and understanding about eating disorders and operating with compassion is essential to reduce stigma and allow those affected to feel supported rather than ashamed. Taking small steps, like practicing empathy and challenging societal pressures, can make a big difference in creating a healthier, more understanding society where mental health improvements in overall well-being are valued.

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