



Getting Support

EATING

DIFFICULTIES



The University of  
Nottingham

University Counselling Service

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What

are

eating

difficulties

?

EATING IS ESSENTIAL TO LIFE. In western societies, most of us have enough to eat and so our relationship with food is no longer simply about survival. Our personal relationships with food starts when we are babies and family and social interactions often take place in the context of eating. In this way, food takes on a wealth of social and personal meanings.

For most people, eating is a pleasurable activity. We are, however, constantly bombarded with images of food, eating and ideal body shapes, that complicate our relationship with food and with our bodies. It is not surprising that many people run into problems with eating too much or too little, or feel unhappy with their bodies. Women and men are rarely satisfied with their body shape and most people have been on a diet at some time.

For some people, the concern with eating and their bodies can become extreme and they may develop eating disorders that are damaging or life threatening.

It is helpful to understand our eating habits as being on a continuum. At either end are the unhealthy, unhappy, eating habits of anorexia nervosa, bulimia and over-eating. In the middle are reasonably healthy, enjoyable eating habits, where most people hover for much of the time.

**ANOREXIA NERVOSA describes a condition where someone restricts their eating to the extent that they maintain a very low body weight or lose weight dramatically, compared with the standard body weight for their height and age.**

The person will believe they are fat however thin they might appear to others. They may wear baggy clothing to disguise weight loss and to avoid comment. They may restrict themselves to a vegetarian, vegan, low fat, low calorie diet or detoxification diet or have periods of self-starvation. They may be preoccupied with exercise and running.

**Anorexia may cause serious health problems, including:**

- Irregular or missed periods in young women
- Loss of sexual interest and impotence in young men
- Low blood pressure causing dizziness and fainting
- Heart, bowel and kidney problems
- Fits or seizures
- Low bone density, leading to brittle bones, osteoporosis or interrupted growth.

**Anorexia affects a person's psychological health and may be a factor related to:**

- Disrupted sleep
- Anxiety
- Poor concentration and motivation, which may affect work or study
- Depression
- Self-harm.

**Symptoms of anorexia may include:**

- Low body weight
- Distorted body image
- Fear of getting fat.

**People with a more severe problem may experience:**

- Hair loss and growth of downy hair on arms and face
- Loss of muscle on legs and arms, with swollen joints
- Protruding eyes
- Low body temperature and constantly feeling cold.

**BINGE EATING AND OVEREATING may follow a period of self-denial, or dieting. Binges are frequently experienced as a loss of control and may be accompanied by feelings of anxiety, guilt or distress.**

The urge to eat to excess may be followed by a desire to purge oneself by vomiting or using laxatives. This is known as *Bulimia Nervosa*. Frequent vomiting can damage a person's teeth and the regular use of laxatives may cause bowel problems.

The signs of bulimia may be less obvious than anorexia, as the person's weight may remain within the normal range, but they or their housemates or friends may notice:

- Binge eating
- Vomiting or always using the toilet after meals
- Eating secretly and hiding food
- Changes in appearance.

## What

## causes

## eating

## difficulties



EATING DIFFICULTIES OFTEN BECOME MORE NOTICEABLE IN ADOLESCENCE, although children frequently express distress by refusing to eat or by comfort eating. Everyone has different attitudes to food and to their bodies and the reasons for eating difficulties will be unique to that particular individual. Examples of issues that may contribute to eating difficulties for some people include:

**Control.** A strict dietary regime can be very reassuring when life seems chaotic or out of control. This is why it can be very tempting to return to an abandoned eating disorder at times of stress or change.

If someone feels helpless and unable to have any control over their life, one thing they may be able to take charge of is how much they eat. Saying “no” to food (going on hunger strike) can be a way of rejecting the control of others, taking control over one aspect of life or even gaining control over those around them.

**Achievement and approval.** High achievers and perfectionists are vulnerable to developing eating disorders. They may set impossibly high targets and expect a lot of themselves and others. Restricting food intake can be a way of achieving a target that is within their control and a means of gaining approval from others. After all, starvation and fasting is associated with saints and heroines and has a long cultural tradition.

Today, the ideal female image, as presented by the media and the diet industry, is a boyish figure, incompatible with most normal adult bodies.

**Avoiding growing up.** As a person grows older, he or she is heaped with responsibilities and expectations. To remain thin and childlike can be very tempting when growing up appears to be a frightening prospect. Starvation can delay or interrupt menstruation for girls and young women and postpones the physical process of becoming an adult woman.

**Comfort Eating.** We talk of being “starved of affection” and there is a close connection between being fed and feeling loved and cared for. When we feel “empty inside”, food can promise to fill the emptiness, particularly foods with strong emotional associations, such as sweets and puddings. Some foods, such as chocolate and sweets, are particularly attractive as they produce a temporary “high” or sugar “rush”, that lifts our mood.

In a similar way to remaining thin and childlike, being overweight can also provide a barrier against feared intimacy or relationships.

How can

you

help

yourself

?

- If you recognise that some of the symptoms described in this leaflet may apply to you, you have already taken a big step forward, as it can be very hard to recognise and accept that you have eating difficulties.
- Talking to family or friends may be helpful. They may have noticed that something is wrong and it may be a relief to know what is happening.
- When you are ready to take action, it is more helpful to learn to manage your own food intake than to let friends or family attempt to control your eating.
- If you are seriously underweight, you may have lost the ability to judge what is an adequate amount of food and you may need professional help to regain some weight.
- Initially, you may prefer to speak to someone you know, such as your tutor; the senior tutor, or a member of staff in your Department or School; or your hall tutor or hall warden. They will put you in touch with specialist services, if necessary.
- There are other members of the University community, such as the chaplains, the Students' Union welfare officer and the welfare reps in hall, whom you may prefer to approach.
- If your difficulties are affecting your academic work, you can talk to your personal tutor, the senior tutor or another member of staff in your Department or School so that they can help you with arrangements for coursework or exams. Academic support can also help with practical support and negotiating about academic issues.
- It may be helpful to seek advice and support from someone who is not directly involved in your life. There is a list of useful resources at the end of this leaflet.

How

can

you  
help

someone

else

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- Often the most helpful thing you can do is to listen. Try not to engage in lengthy discussions about calories or the person's weight, as that may reinforce unhelpful beliefs.
- Be honest about how you feel about the person's eating disorder. You may have to be very patient, as they may not be ready to change their eating behaviour, even though they may know it is harmful. There is little point in trying to persuade someone to eat, or to lose weight, until they are ready to make the change.
- Encourage the person to get some support and help, perhaps by talking to a counsellor or to a doctor.
- Do not try to control the other person's eating. It will lead to conflict and they may simply hide their behaviour more carefully.
- Encourage him or her to talk about everyday things and to do normal activities.
- If you think the person is at risk in any way, contact Cripps Health Centre or the University Counselling Service for help and advice.
- Living with a person who has an eating disorder can be disturbing and frustrating. You may want some support for yourself, or simply a place to talk in confidence. The University Counselling Service is available to students or staff who need this kind of support.

## When is specialist help appropriate?

**MANY PEOPLE MAY DIET OR COMFORT EAT TO RELIEVE ANXIETY OR DISTRESS, particularly at times of stress such as exams. If, however, this has become a regular pattern, or if your eating habits are causing concern for you, or the people who care about you, it might be helpful to talk about it, with your doctor, practice nurse or a counsellor.**

Eating difficulties can cause physical and psychological health problems.

Your doctor has knowledge and experience and he or she can be a source of support, as well as offering help, advice and treatment if necessary. Those people with more serious problems, may need a referral to a dietician or to an eating disorders clinic. Your doctor will be able to arrange this for you if necessary.

The University Counselling Service is another source of help and support. The counsellors have experience of working with students with eating difficulties. Making changes can be a long process of ups and downs and it is sometimes helpful to have support and help from someone who is not directly involved in your daily life. A counsellor may help you to understand what is happening and to learn new ways of coping with your feelings and with events in your life, without having to starve yourself or binge.

## AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NOTTINGHAM

**The University Counselling Service** offers free, confidential counselling, group therapy and workshops to undergraduate and postgraduate students and to University staff. The Service also offers support to those concerned about the welfare of a friend, housemate, relative or colleague. Counselling is available at University Park, Sutton Bonington, Jubilee and some School of Nursing and Midwifery Centres.

To arrange an initial appointment, telephone **0115 951 3695**, or e-mail **counselling.service@nottingham.ac.uk** or call in to room **A/5 Trent Building, University Park**. Visit the web site at **www.nottingham.ac.uk/counselling/** for further information and useful self-help links.

- **Your GP** can offer you support, advice, referral to specialist help or medical treatment. If you are registered with **Cripps Health Centre**, telephone **0115 846 8888** (internal extension 75). Out of hours calls will be referred to Nottingham Emergency Medical Services.
- **Academic Support** offers advice, practical help and support to individual students experiencing study problems, in addition to assisting students with dyslexia or a disability. They also offer a range of workshops and groups throughout the academic year.

For details, visit their website at **www.nottingham.ac.uk/academicssupport**, or contact them at **Student Services Centre, Portland Building** telephone **0115 951 3710**.

- Each School appoints a **Disability Liaison Officer** (DLO) to provide advice and guidance for students and members of staff, about disability issues and to offer support. For further information, visit the web site at **www.nottingham.ac.uk/disability/dliaison**
- **The chaplains** offer spiritual and emotional support and guidance, to students and staff of all faiths, or none. Contact the chaplains in the **Portland Building, University Park** or telephone **0115 951 3931**.
- **The Students' Union welfare officer** and the welfare reps in hall offer advice and support. Contact them through the **Student Advice and Representation Centre** in the **Portland Building**, telephone **0115 946 8730**.
- **Nightline**, telephone **0115 951 4985**, offers a confidential telephone listening service, run by students for students which is available from 7pm-8am every night during term-time.



## LOCAL AND NATIONAL RESOURCES

- **beat** offers a telephone helpline **0845 634 1414** and a website at **[www.b-eat.co.uk](http://www.b-eat.co.uk)** with information about eating disorders, self-help advice, support groups and resources.
- **Nottingham Counselling Centre**, 32 Heathcote Street, Hockley, Nottingham, telephone **0115 950 1743**, offers confidential, subsidised counselling, to any individual aged over 20.
- **Speakeasy at Connexions**, 24–32 Carlton Street, Hockley, Nottingham telephone **0115 992 6102** offers free counselling, information and support, for young people aged between 13 and 25.
- **Base 51**, 51 Glasshouse Street, Nottingham, telephone **0115 952 5040** is a health care project for young people aged between 12 and 25, who find it difficult to access mainstream health services.
- **The Samaritans** offer a listening ear 24 hours a day, Telephone **08457 90 90 90** (calls charged at local rate).
- **MIND** (National Association for Mental Health). For details of local services contact *Mindinfo*, telephone **0845 766 0163** or visit the website at **[www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)**
- **The Emergency Department** at Queen’s Medical Centre is available 24-hours, for medical assessment and treatment.
- **NHS Direct** offers 24-hour telephone health care advice and information, telephone **0845 4647**, website **[www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)**.

## FURTHER READING

- **Anorexia Nervosa – A Survival Guide for Families, Friends and Sufferers** by Janet Treasure, Psychology Press.
- **On Eating** by Susie Orbach, Penguin Books. Offers an alternative way of thinking about eating and advice on ending the cycle of dieting, denial and bingeing.
- **Getting Better Bit(e) by Bit(e) – A Survival Kit for Sufferers of Bulimia Nervosa and Binge Eating Disorders** by Ulrike Schmidt and Janet Treasure, Psychology Press.