



Supporting Young People to Take Charge of Their Mental Health

Eating Disorders

What are eating disorders?

Developing an eating disorder can be a sign that we have a complex relationship with food and our self-image. Eating disorders are a way of coping with feelings of unhappiness and depression. It can also be used as a means to gain some control over your emotions in a physical way, although eating disorders are actually very harmful physically and emotionally. Having an eating disorder is a sign that you need help in coping with things in life, and working through emotional difficulties.

Eating disorders are complex and not all signs and symptoms will apply to us. There are a number of different eating disorders and signs that we might be suffering from one or more of them:

Anorexia Nervosa

Physical symptoms –

- severe weight loss
- periods stopping (amenorrhoea)
- hormonal changes
- stomach pains
- constipation
- dizziness
- changes in sleeping patterns
- feeling cold constantly

Behaviours –

- lying about having eaten meals
- needing to control a situation
- being in denial that there is an issue
- wearing baggy clothes to disguise weight loss or perceived weight gain
- fixation with exercising excessively
- isolating ourselves and wanting to be alone

Emotional signs –

- intense and irrational fear of gaining weight
- having an obsession with dieting and portion control
- having a distorted view of our shape and size, often not based in reality

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- experiencing guilt after eating
- preoccupation with food
- feeling guilty when we eat
- depressive symptoms

Bulimia nervosa

Physical symptoms –

- suffering sore throats and swollen glands
- experiencing issues with our teeth such as sensitivity and enamel damage
- stomach pains
- getting infections in our mouths
- irregular periods
- extremely dry skin

Behaviours –

- eating large quantities of food in a single sitting
- purging and vomiting after eating
- secretive behaviour to cover our tracks
- excessive abuse of laxatives

Emotional signs –

- feeling guilty after eating
- feeling intense shame and guilt for our actions
- feeling out of control and powerless to stop
- suffering serious mood swings

Binge Eating Disorder (BED)

Physical symptoms –

- weight gain

Behaviours –

- eating large quantities of food
- being secretive about our eating
- eating inappropriate and unhealthy foods

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Emotional signs –

- feeling guilty after eating
- feeling ashamed and depressed
- suffering intense mood swings
- feeling powerless

We may also suffer from EDNOS – an eating disorder not otherwise specified. This means we may meet some but not all the diagnostic criteria for the above types of eating disorder, but do have disordered eating habits and emotional issues going on.

What causes eating disorders?

When suffering from an eating disorder it may actually be our underlying emotional issues and distress that are the catalysts for developing one, rather than the root issue being food itself.

When we transition from childhood and enter puberty or pre-pubescence, our bodies change and develop in new and sometimes overwhelming ways. These changes can be hard to come to terms with and adjust to. As a result of this, eating disorders are much more common in young people going through such huge image and life changes including how we look and feel about ourselves.

Developing unhealthy eating patterns or dieting excessively when we are young can lead to more extreme disorders that we might use as a way to exert some control over our lives, or as a means to help us cope with stressful and upsetting times we face at this age. These can include exam stress, family breakdowns, bullying, friendship issues, and issues with dating and sex.

Eating disorders are commonly associated with young women, but increasingly, young men are also becoming more susceptible to developing a disorder.

Getting help

It can be very difficult to get better on our own once we are in the grip of an eating disorder, so it is really important to seek professional help as soon as possible. Remember, that in the extreme, people do die from eating disorders. We and your loved ones don't want you to suffer in this way.

Doctors will assess our physical condition and refer us for appropriate help depending on the issues we are suffering. This can include seeing psychiatrists, psychologists, dieticians, nutritionists or counsellors, or a combination of these professions.

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You don't have to see your GP alone – try to confide in a trusted loved one like a parent, carer, friend or teacher who can then help you speak to other people and your doctor about the problems you are facing. The more people who know, the more help we'll get to break the cycle of eating disorders.

Remember – we have done nothing to bring this on ourselves and any shame or guilt we feel is down to the eating disorder, not us. Don't let the disorder win.

How can No5 help?

Learning to effectively deal with the issues at the root of eating disorders is important, as not dealt with it can cause long-term issues that last into adulthood, so it is important to talk to somebody about it if things are becoming too much to handle. Here at No5 we offer free, impartial and confidential support to young people aged 11-25. Come and talk to us – counselling is about listening to, and helping YOU to work through your problems and find more effective ways of dealing with life's issues, in a caring, trusting environment.

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