



Information Sheet: Eating Disorders

What are eating disorders?

The term 'eating disorder' covers a range of different eating habits which can damage health, the most common being anorexia nervosa, bulimia and compulsive eating. Females, and especially young women, are around 10 times more likely to suffer from anorexia and bulimia than males, but the gap is narrowing. Early treatment is the most effective means of preventing people from developing more severe or chronic problems. Diabetics and pregnant women especially need early professional help.

Signs:

People with **anorexia** worry more and more about their weight. They eat less and less, and exercise more to burn off calories. They may smoke or chew gum more to keep their weight down. They may lose interest in sex (women's periods may stop and men may stop getting erections). Sufferers feel they are overweight despite the evidence. They are often very interested in food, and enjoy preparing it for others: they still get hungry, but consume less and less. They often lie to people about what they eat – denial is part of the condition.

People with **bulimia** also worry about their weight. They binge eat, and may vomit or use laxatives to try to control their weight. They often feel tired and guilty, and can tend to stay a normal weight, despite trying to diet.

Compulsive eaters tend to rely on food for emotional support. They do not necessarily purge after over-eating.

How you can help a sufferer:

Firstly, try to encourage sufferers to seek professional help. Meanwhile, you can be emotionally supportive by being encouraging but not intrusive – try to listen without judgment to sufferers' thoughts and feelings. Ask how they *feel* but not what they've *done*: try to help them express their emotions. You can be practically supportive by trying to make mealtimes sociable and enjoyable, involving them in food preparation. Let them know it is who they are, not what they look like which is important to you. But remember - these conditions are highly emotionally charged: if you live with someone who has an eating disorder you may need to seek support for yourself when the going is hard.

How you can help yourself:

Be honest with yourself and seek help if you think you need it. Stick to regular mealtimes – try keeping a food diary: noting down your thoughts and feelings.

What CCL offers: We cannot work with sufferers of anorexia or bulimia. They need specific specialist long-term support, including physical monitoring. Contact your doctor about this.

We *can* offer counselling to those living with people who have eating disorders, to allow them to talk about their feelings and explore how they can help sufferers. RCS can also offer counselling if you feel your eating habits leave you at risk of developing a serious eating disorder.

Other sources of information:

'Getting Better Bite by Bite' by Ulrike Schmidt and Janet Treasure.

'Anorexia Nervosa: A Survival Guide' by Janet Treasure.

'Bulimia – A guide for Family and Friends' by R Trattner Sherman and R A Thompson.

- www.repsych.ac.uk and click on leaflets choice box for information leaflets.
- www.b-eat.co.uk;
- www.youngminds.org.uk.