Information About Eating Disorders
A Guide For Young People

EATING DISORDERS ASSOCIATION
support and understanding about eating disorders
Food is essential for our health and development

This booklet aims to . . .

- Explain what an eating disorder is.
- Give some possible reasons why eating disorders develop.
- Tell you how to get help if you think you have an eating disorder.
- Give you information on confidentiality and your rights.
- Explain the treatments available and what to expect while you are recovering.
What are Eating Disorders?

Food and eating play a very important part in our lives. We all vary in the foods we like, how much we need to eat, and when we like to eat. Food is essential for our health and development.

It's not unusual for young people to experiment with food. For example you may have decided to become a vegetarian, or to try out new and more exotic foods. As you grow, your body shape will change, especially through puberty. Maybe you have also tried changing your diet to improve your health? All of this, within reason, is acceptable.

However, some eating patterns can be damaging. Problems with food begin when it is used to cope with those times when you are bored, anxious, angry, lonely, ashamed or sad. Food becomes a problem when it is used to help you to cope with painful situations or feelings or to relieve stress. If this is how you deal with food and you are unhappy about it, then you should talk about it with someone you trust. Try not to battle up your feelings because this is not helpful to you or other people around you, it won't make you feel any better and the problem will not go away.

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Boys, girls, men and women from all types of background can suffer from eating disorders. Eating disorders are a way of coping with feelings that are making you unhappy or depressed.

There are many reasons why people develop eating disorders. Often there is not one single cause, but a series of events, feelings or pressures which make you feel unable to cope. These can include: low self esteem, family relationships, problems with friends, the death of someone special, problems at school (for example being bullied, pressure of exams etc.), lack of confidence, or sexual or emotional abuse. Many people talk about simply feeling "not good enough". Lots of people with eating disorders say that the eating disorder is the only way they feel they can be in control of their life, but as time goes on it isn't really you who is in control - it is the eating disorder. Some people also find they are affected by an urge to harm themselves or abuse alcohol or drugs.

The full medical names for anorexia and bulimia are Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa. For simplicity we have called them anorexia and bulimia.

It's important to know that not everyone will have the same symptoms, some people will have a mix of symptoms and you do not need to have all the symptoms to have a serious eating disorder.
"I thought about food and calories all the time. I tried to avoid foods containing lots of fat or carbohydrates and only had 'safe' foods which I felt were OK to eat."

What is Anorexia Nervosa?

Anorexia is a disorder (or illness) which stems from low self esteem and an inability to cope safely with worries and problems. It involves lowering your food intake by skipping meals and cutting down the types and amounts of food you eat; some people over-exercise as well. You may believe that if you lose weight your life will be happier, people will like you more, you will be more successful or even perhaps that you may be noticed less.

"Sometimes I skipped meals and did a lot of exercise especially on the days when I could not avoid eating. I felt I had to punish myself for eating and try to lose the calories I had eaten."
You may try to find ways of punishing yourself if you don’t lose enough weight or eat something you would not usually eat. Losing weight is not the answer. It is important that you try and focus on who you are, and what may have caused you to feel the way you do. Try to change the way you feel about yourself and aim to find safer ways of coping.

If you have an eating disorder, it may feel like a losing battle. Your concern about food, calories and weight may start to control you.

“Losing weight gave me a real buzz and I felt good at something. At first, starving myself and over-exercising made me feel great and that I had loads of energy. Later I found out that this was an ‘artificial high’ and that it was my body’s way of telling me to find food.”

“As I lost weight I began to feel tired and this made me more depressed. I couldn’t think straight or concentrate at school. All I could think about was food because my brain and body was craving for it. I realise now I was suffering from the effects of starvation.”
"I had a 'voice' in my head that shouted at me. It told me I was fat and worthless and that I was not allowed to eat because I did not deserve food. I thought I was in control of my eating but it got harder and harder to ignore the voice."

Some of the ways that anorexia can affect you are:

**Your body:**
- severe weight loss;
- difficulty sleeping and tiredness;
- dizziness;
- stomach pains;
- constipation;
- feeling cold;
- growth of downy (soft and fine) hair all over your body;
- your periods stop or don't start;
- feeling uninterested in the opposite sex;
- your hair falls out.

**How you behave:**
- excessive exercising;
- having ritual or obsessive behaviours;
- being secretive;
- lying about eating;
- trying to please everyone;
- cooking or preparing food for everyone else;
- wearing baggy clothes.

**How you think and feel:**
- feeling fat when you are really underweight;
- getting irritable and moody;
- setting high standards and being a perfectionist;
- shutting yourself off from the world;
- thinking things are either right or wrong, there is no in between;
- difficulty concentrating.