Understanding Eating Disorders

EATING DISORDERS ASSOCIATION
support and understanding about eating disorders
Introduction

This booklet aims to explain how people develop eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa (usually shortened to anorexia and bulimia), binge eating disorder and other associated disorders. It will also briefly explore how they may affect your life, the lives of those around you and routes towards recovery.

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 to experiment with different eating habits, for example you may have decided to become a vegetarian or tried changing your diet to improve your health. However, some eating patterns can be damaging.

Problems with food can 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 perhaps without you even realising it. If this is how you deal with emotions and feelings and you are unhappy about it you should try to talk to someone you trust. Try not to bottle things up - this is not helpful to you or other people around you, it won't make you feel any better and the problem is unlikely to go away.
It is unlikely that an eating disorder will result from a single cause. It is much more likely to be a combination of many factors, 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 work, college or university, lack of confidence, sexual or emotional abuse. Many people talk about simply feeling ‘too fat’ or ‘not good enough’.

Often people with eating disorders say that the eating disorder is the only way they feel they can stay 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 misuse alcohol or drugs. You may find that in common with many other people you experience feelings of despair and shame. You may have a feeling of failure or lack of control because you cannot overcome these feelings about food on your own.
Who do eating disorders affect and when?

Anyone can develop an eating disorder, regardless of age, sex, cultural or racial background, although the people most likely to be affected tend to be young women, particularly between the ages of 15-25. It is not unusual, however, for an eating disorder to appear in middle age.

Research has shown that your genetic make-up may have a small impact upon whether or not you develop an eating disorder. Even the attitude of other family members towards food can have an impact. A key person - a parent or relative - may unwittingly influence other family members through his or her attitude to food. In situations where there are high academic expectations, family issues or social pressures, you may focus on food and eating as a way of coping with these stresses. Traumatic events can sometimes trigger an eating disorder; bereavement, being bullied or abused, an upheaval in the family (such as divorce), long term illness or concerns over sexuality. Someone with a long-term illness or disability - such as diabetes, depression, blindness or deafness - may also experience eating problems.
Men and Eating Disorders

Many people assume that eating disorders only affect teenage women. This is not true. About 10% of people diagnosed as having an eating disorder are men. However, there are probably many more undiagnosed cases because there is less chance of the condition being recognised in male sufferers. Many men find it hard to ask for help especially when the doctor or counsellor does not recognise their symptoms.

One of the most common symptoms of eating disorders in men (and often in women too) is an exaggerated concern about fitness leading to over-exercising. This can put excessive pressure upon joints and lead to osteoarthritis, and muscular complaints. It may also strain heart and lungs.
How do I know if I have an Eating Disorder?

It's important to know that everyone will not have the same symptoms. Some people will have a mix of symptoms and you do not need to have all these symptoms to have an eating disorder.

Anorexia Nervosa

‘Anorexia nervosa’ means ‘loss of appetite for nervous reasons’ but this is misleading because in reality you have lost the ability to allow yourself to satisfy your appetite. You probably restrict the amount you eat and drink, sometimes to a dangerous level. You may exercise to burn off what you perceive to be excess calories. You focus on food in an attempt to cope with life, not to starve yourself to death. It is a way of demonstrating that you are in control of your body weight and shape. Ultimately, however, the disorder itself takes control and the chemical changes in the body affect the brain and distort thinking, making it almost impossible for you to make rational decisions about food. As the illness progresses, you will suffer from the exhaustion and other effects of starvation. Occasionally people die from the effects of anorexia, especially if it is untreated.