

A Guide to understanding and coping with common mental health issues.

Issues covered in this guide include:

- Warning Signs of a Mental Health Crisis
- Coping With Anxiety
- Coping With Depression
- Coping With Stress
- Coping With Bullying & Cyber-bullying
- Active Listening and how it can help

Help And Assistance

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Coping *with*

AN EATING DISORDER



COPING WITH THE PRESSURES OF DAILY LIFE
Short guides to coping with common mental health issues

Coping *with*

AN EATING DISORDER

First Publication March 2022

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Published by Youth Suicide Prevention Ireland Publications Limited

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The term eating disorder refers to a wide range of behaviours that disrupt a healthy relationship with food. Those with an eating disorder may become obsessed with food, their weight, or how they look. This can lead to severe calorie restriction, binge eating, induced vomiting and the use of laxatives.

Eating disorders are not a choice. Instead, they are a mental health condition. They may develop as a result of the social environment, be related to other mental health conditions, or have a genetic component. It can be very worrying to have an eating disorder, or know someone who has disordered eating, but there are ways that these conditions can be treated. In this article we will explore eating disorders in more detail.

What is an Eating Disorder?

In health, we can enjoy eating nutritious foods that will help our bodies to function correctly. Although we might be aware of our weight, and may want it to remain within a healthy range, we are able to enjoy food and can choose to eat whatever appeals to us at each meal. However, for those with an eating disorder, the relationship between food, weight and body image becomes fraught. This might include an extreme fear of weight gain, a distorted body image, and a dread of mealtimes.

Although the media may often indicate that eating disorders affect women and girls, men and boys are also affected by anorexia, bulimia and other forms of disordered eating.

When learning about eating disorders, it is helpful to understand the following terms:

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When learning about eating disorders, it is helpful to understand the following terms:

- Binging - eating excessively
- Purging - getting rid of the food consumed by making yourself sick, taking laxatives or exercising excessively to burn more calories
- Induced vomiting – making yourself sick
- Body mass index (BMI) – a ratio that is calculated by comparing weight with height. A low BMI indicates that someone’s weight is lower than would be expected for their height
- Malnutrition – a lack of nutrients in the diet that leads to physical ill-health.

The term eating disorder covers a spectrum of behaviours that relate to the relationship with food. Here we will look at the most common types of disordered eating.



Anorexia Nervosa

Anorexia nervosa is probably the most well-known eating disorder. Those with anorexia severely restrict what they eat, which can lead to significant weight loss. There is often an intense fear of weight gain. Some people with anorexia will also exercise excessively to further aid weight loss. Friends and family may see alarming weight loss or worry that an individual appears to be severely underweight.

However, someone with anorexia may have a distorted view of what they look like which does not match their true, underweight appearance. This distortion can occur even if the scales tell them that they have a very low body weight.

Although some people with anorexia lose weight purely by restricting their food intake, others follow a bingeing and purging pattern. They may binge on large quantities of foods before making themselves sick or using laxatives to try to rid themselves of the food.

Bulimia Nervosa

Bulimia nervosa is an eating disorder that involves bingeing and purging, rather than severe calorie restriction. When bingeing on large quantities of food, an individual may feel that they are not in control of their actions. They will then purge by making themselves sick, or by taking laxatives or other medications, to get rid of the food faster.

Bulimia nervosa shares some similarities with anorexia. An individual is likely desperate to avoid weight gain, but may not restrict calorie intake or be as underweight as someone with anorexia. However, their body shape or appearance remain very important to them.

Binge Eating Disorder

Binge eating disorder is more common than many people realise. Those with this form of disordered eating feel compelled to consume very large quantities of food, even if they do not feel hungry or are already full. They often experience a lack of control and continue to eat even though the process feels distressing. Afterwards, they may feel guilty or ashamed for eating in this way.

Unlike bulimia, those who binge eat do not take part in a purging process. Binge eating disorder is more likely to lead to weight gain, and therefore to the medical complications associated with being overweight or obese. However, it is often not recognised as a disorder and may incorrectly be simply viewed as over-eating.



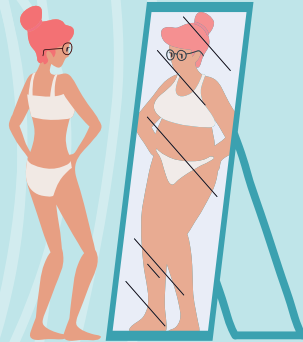
Avoidant and Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID)

Avoidant and Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID) tends to affect children and teenagers. It is sometimes incorrectly thought of as an extreme form of 'picky eating' or food fussiness, but is far more complicated than this. Those who suffer from ARFID may eat in a manner that is so selective that they experience extreme weight loss and nutritional deficiencies. This can lead to serious medical complications, malnutrition and interfere with everyday life. ARFID may occur in children with learning disabilities, following a traumatic personal experience, or following an episode of choking or another traumatic food-related event.

What Causes an Eating Disorder to Occur?

Eating disorders are a mental health condition. The exact cause for an eating disorder developing is often not found, however, experts believe that disordered eating may be related to a number of factors, including:

- Genetics or family history
- The existence of poor emotional health or another mental health condition such as anxiety, depression or obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)
- Low self-esteem
- A desire for perfectionism
- Being in your teens or early twenties
- Any form of stress including relationship breakdowns, money worries, moving house, parental separation, exam stress, and being abused.

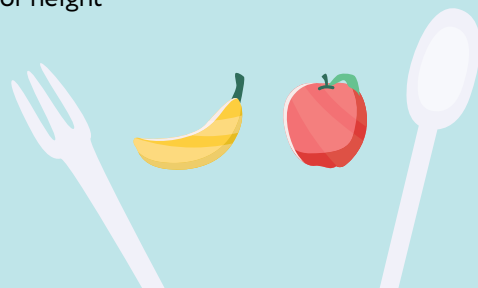


Often, an eating disorder will start slowly. You might find yourself becoming more aware of calories, or starting to monitor your weight. Gradually, this can escalate into increased control around food, and disordered patterns of eating.

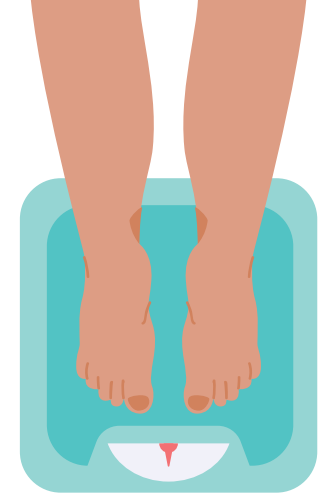
How Do I Recognise an Eating Disorder?

If you are worried that you might have an eating disorder it can be hard to admit it, even to yourself. You may need to consider whether you have an eating disorder if you:

- Have become fixated on your weight, losing weight, or maintaining your current weight
- Have a very low weight for your age or height
- Have a low body mass index (BMI)
- Miss meals
- Severely restrict what you eat
- Binge on food



- Make yourself sick or take laxatives to lose weight
- Exercise excessively to try to lose weight
- Are a woman and no longer have periods, or have found that your periods are now irregular
- Are a teenage girl who has not started having periods, even though you might have expected to
- Feel tired or need to sleep more
- Have more hair growing on your arms and legs
- Have skin that is drier than usual
- Feel sad, low or anxious
- Feel guilty or ashamed of your eating patterns.



What Can I Do to Cope with an Eating Disorder?

One of the first steps in coping with an eating disorder is to start accepting that your patterns of eating may not be healthy. Whether you severely restrict what you eat, binge eat, or binge and purge, recognising your feelings around your weight and food is vital. Eating disorders are treatable with help and support, and the following suggestions may help you begin to start managing your relationship with food and weight.

Talk to someone

Think about who you could talk to about the way you eat. Finding someone who will be understanding, such as a friend, teacher, sports coach, or another adult could be the first step in starting to understand your feelings around your eating patterns.

If you do not feel that you can approach someone who knows you well, you may be able to access counselling through your doctor or at your school.

Seek professional help

Eating disorders are complex and often require the help of a professional. You should visit your doctor who can start by talking to you about how you feel. They may refer you to a professional who specialises in eating disorders, as they will be able to offer tailored advice based on your patterns of eating and your feelings about food and weight.

Your doctor may also refer you for counselling or cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). CBT may help you to change your thought patterns around food, with the aim that over time your thoughts will become healthier.

In some cases, your doctor may advise that you consider treatment for any other underlying medical conditions, such as anxiety or depression. Managing these conditions can make it easier to recover from an eating disorder.

Try self-reflection

The way that you feel about trying to cope with an eating disorder will likely be complex. Recovery will require you to change the way you see food and your weight, and in some cases recovery means gaining weight which can feel scary.

As well as talking to others and seeking professional advice, you can support your own recovery by:

- Writing down your thoughts in a journal
- Practising meditation or mindfulness using an app
- Writing a list of positive affirmations.



Final Thoughts

Eating disorders are a mental health condition. Although they have previously been assumed to mostly affect young women, they can affect men and women of any age. It is possible to manage an eating disorder, and you should seek help and advice from your doctor who will make the appropriate recommendations or referrals.

I have a friend who might have an eating disorder. What can I do to help them?

It can be very upsetting to see a friend struggle with an eating disorder, but it can also feel frustrating at times. Seeing someone refuse to eat may make you feel irritated, but it is important to remember that an eating disorder is a mental health condition and not a choice. Your friend will value your support, but you are not responsible for making them better.

It is natural to want to support your friend if they are struggling with eating patterns. To help someone close to you, you should:

- Speak to a parent or another adult about your concerns – an eating disorder is not something that you can help your friend with on your own
- Gently try to talk to them about how they are feeling
- See if they will talk to their parents about their eating patterns or weight concerns
- Suggest that they speak to their doctor or a counsellor
- Avoid judging their eating patterns
- Remain patient
- Avoid being critical or showing that you are frustrated
- Resist commenting on their weight or what they are eating
- Continue to invite them to social events.



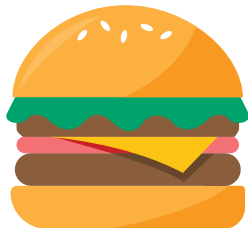
I think my child might have an eating disorder, what are the signs?

Children and teenagers who have an eating disorder may do their best to hide the signs of it from friends and family. The fear of being 'found out' and pressurised to eat in a healthy manner can lead to secretive behaviour. Although you may notice dramatic weight loss, other signs of an eating disorder can be harder to spot. This can be especially true in a child who is bingeing and purging, as their weight may not visibly change.

If you notice any of the following, you should consider whether your child might have disordered eating:

- Becoming obsessive about food, calories and calorie counting, or the nutritional content of each meal
- Rejecting certain meals or snacks that they used to enjoy
- Adopting new diets, such as veganism, that gradually become more restrictive
- Avoiding family meal times
- Suddenly making their own lunch for school
- Claiming to have eaten elsewhere and therefore not needing a particular meal

- Changes in behaviour including irritability, frustration, low mood and other emotional changes
- Expressing distorted views about their body, such as being fat when they are slim
- Increased tiredness or difficulty concentrating
- Starting to exercise excessively
- Going to the toilet straight after meals
- Eating large quantities that would be considered more than a normal amount
- Eating in secret.



What should I do if my child has an eating disorder?

As a parent, you can feel helpless if your child develops an eating disorder. If you suspect that your child is eating in a disordered manner, you should take steps to help them straight away by:

- Seeking medical advice from your child's doctor
- Accessing specialist counselling or CBT via your child's doctor, or through an eating disorder charity or specialist
- Talking to your child about how they are feeling, without being judgmental or critical of their behaviour
- Being patient
- Avoiding overtly dieting around your child, as this will reinforce this behaviour as normal or acceptable
- Trying to reinforce positive body image where possible
- Avoiding referencing your child's weight or appearance
- Encouraging your child to keep attending social events, hobbies or clubs
- Avoiding making mealtimes stressful, and trying not to comment on what your child eats.

You will need to take care of your own wellbeing while helping your child. You may need to access counselling for yourself, or talk to your own friends or family about how you are feeling. You may find it helpful to find support groups for parents of children with eating disorders, as speaking to others in a similar situation may make you feel less alone and more empowered to help your child.

Help and Assistance

If you are concerned about yourself, friends or family you should contact your GP or Out of Hours Service immediately.

You can also get immediate support and information 24/7 by

 **FreeText HELP to 50015**

Texting 50015 is free of charge from any network and you can text this number even if you have no credit. This service is fully confidential and YSPI has no information on mobile numbers that use the FreeText service



For information on:

- [Emergency Contacts](#)
- [National Helplines](#)
- [Local Support Groups](#)
- [Directions to your nearest GP or out of hours clinic](#)
- [Directions to your nearest safe place or refuge](#)

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