

# understanding eating disorders

## What is an eating disorder?

Disordered eating is when a person has an unhealthy relationship with food and eating, and distress about weight or how their body looks. When this reaches a significant level, it may be diagnosed as an eating disorder.

Disordered eating often begins with dieting, but lots of other factors can increase the risk that this may develop into an eating disorder. These include:

- family factors – like a family history of eating disorders
- individual factors – such as low self-esteem or wanting to do things perfectly all the time
- outside factors – like the influence of the media and social pressures to look a certain way
- life factors – like exams, work, relationships and feeling overwhelmed.

## What mental health problems are related to disordered eating?

Young people with disordered eating are more likely to experience other mental health difficulties at the same time:

- anxiety
- depression
- substance use disorders
- self harm and suicidal thinking
- neurodevelopmental disorders (such as ADHD, conduct disorder, oppositional defiant disorder).

## Signs and symptoms

### Changes in behaviour

#### that you might notice in yourself

Using food as a way to control or express emotions (e.g. skipping meals), repetitive or obsessive dieting, frequent binge eating.

### Changes in behaviour

#### that you might notice in others

Exercising lots or marked increase in reading food labels and food preparation.

### Changes in thoughts and feelings

#### that you might notice in yourself

Thinking about food, weight and body appearance a lot of the time, worrying about eating, feeling guilty or being scared about gaining weight.

### Changes in thoughts and feelings

#### that you might notice in others

Talking about food, irritability, withdrawal or other mood changes.

### Changes in your body

#### that you might notice in yourself

Difficulty concentrating, or often feeling tired and low in energy.

### Changes in the body

#### that you might notice in others

Weight changes, decreased energy, increased illness.

## What are the common types of eating disorders?

There are two main types of eating disorders: anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa.

**Anorexia nervosa** is when a person:

- gets less energy (food) than their body requires to maintain health
- has an intense fear of gaining weight
- sees their body size or shape in a distorted and disturbed way.

People experiencing anorexia nervosa also have weight loss and/or are underweight.

There are two types of anorexia nervosa:

- **restrictive** (not eating enough and/or exercising a lot more than food intake)
- **binge-purge** when a person eats (sometimes to excess) and then through some method removes that food.

People may experience both of these types at different times.

**Bulimia nervosa** involves a cycle of binge eating (eating a large amount of food quickly, in a way that feels uncontrolled), followed by actions to get rid of the food eaten.

People experiencing bulimia nervosa usually have strong feelings of distress, guilt and shame about these experiences, and are often very critical of their body.

## What can I do?

Alongside professional help, if you think you may be developing signs of unhealthy eating habits, there are lots of things that you can do to help get on top of things.

### Seek support from people you trust

Reach out to a close friend, family member or school counsellor or others who have experienced disordered eating. Being open and honest about these feelings with supportive people can remind you that you're not alone, and help you find self-acceptance.

### Reconnect with who you are

Disordered eating can be tough and at times you might forget that there's more to you than these challenges. Reconnecting with the other parts of yourself can help to build up your

identity 'outside' of the disorder. Try getting back into things you used to enjoy or experiment with new things or things that you've always wanted to try.

### Be kind to yourself

Recovery can take some time and it can feel exhausting, so try not to be hard on yourself if things aren't going well. You could try keeping a 'recovery journal', to record your achievements and successes along the way. When you hit a rough patch, looking back at this journal can help keep your energy and motivation up. Celebrate the wins that you do have, even if they are small.



**Disordered eating is a serious health issue, and can be life-threatening. If you're having problems with disordered eating or body image, it's important to seek professional support.**

## How can I get help?

Many people with disordered eating feel that their experiences aren't bad enough, or they aren't thin enough to need professional help.

No matter what a person weighs, how much or little they eat, anybody experiencing unhealthy eating patterns and distress about how they look should seek professional support.

It's a good idea to try and find help sooner rather than later. The earlier you get support, the quicker you can start recovering.

- Your doctor can help support you with your physical health needs as well as assist you in accessing the right mental health support.
- You can chat to someone at your local headspace centre, or find online and phone support at [ehespace](https://www.headspace.org.au).
- If you're at school or university, you might be able to access a counselling or student wellbeing service.

Check out these other useful websites for more information and support with disordered eating:

- ED Hope Support Line – phone, email, and live webchat support
- The Butterfly Foundation – resources, phone, email, and live webchat support
- Overcoming Disordered Eating (CCI WA) – an online program that can be very useful to use alongside professional support.



**If you or someone you know is going through a tough time you can get help and support from headspace, your school or university wellbeing service or your local health provider. For more information, to find your nearest headspace centre, or for online and telephone support, visit [headspace.org.au](https://www.headspace.org.au)**



**If you need immediate assistance call 000 or to speak to someone urgently, please call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467.**

The headspace Clinical Reference Group have approved this clinical resource. Fact sheets are for general information only. They are not intended to be and should not be relied on as a substitute for specific medical or health advice. While every effort is taken to ensure the information is accurate, headspace makes no representations and gives no warranties that this information is correct, current, complete, reliable or suitable for any purpose. We disclaim all responsibility and liability for any direct or indirect loss, damage, cost or expense whatsoever in the use of or reliance upon this information. Version 1.0, 13 April 2019