

Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Services

Eating Disorders

- Anorexia Nervosa
- Bulimia Nervosa
- Compulsory Eating



Coventry City Council

www.coventry.gov.uk/ohsw

Introduction

Everybody needs to eat in order to survive, but some people eat more, others eat less. Some put on weight easily, others do not and some people go to such extremes that they harm themselves by eating too much or too little. This could develop into an **eating disorder**.

Women are 10 times more likely to experience an eating disorder than men, although the problem is increasing amongst men.

The problem is more common than many of us realise because of the secretive nature of eating disorders and sufferers can feel very alone and isolated. Eating disorders affect people's health, work performance, family and social life.

Symptoms

Anorexia Nervosa:

- Fear of fatness
- Under eating
- Excessive loss of weight
- Vigorous exercise
- Monthly periods stop
- Obsessive calorie counting
- Use of slimming pills
- Keen interest in buying and preparing food for others
- Anorexia usually develops in young women (late teens, early 20s)
- Anorexia often develops when the individual is a high achiever and has very high expectations of themselves

Bulimia Nervosa

- Fear of fatness
- Binge eating
- May maintain a normal weight
- Irregular periods
- Vomiting
- Excessive use of laxatives
- Bulimia often develops out of anorexia
- Bulimia often develops amongst women in their early to mid-twenties who have been overweight as children
- Weight may fluctuate

Compulsive Eating

- Fluctuating weight
- Yo-yo dieting
- Binge eating
- Obesity

Consequences of eating disorders

Starvation:

- Broken sleep
- Constipation
- Poor concentration
- Depression
- Feeling the cold
- Brittle bones which break easily
- Muscles become weaker
- Fatigue
- Death

Vomiting:

- Irregular heartbeats
- Muscle weakness
- Kidney damage
- Epileptic fits
- Stomach acid dissolves the enamel on teeth
- Puffy face (due to swollen salivary glands)

Laxatives:

- Persistent stomach pain
- Swollen fingers
- Damage of bowel muscles, which may lead to long term constipation

Bingeing:

- Stomach pain
- Indigestion
- Weight gain

Possible causes of eating disorders

Social pressure

Western society values thinness. In societies which do not value thinness, eating disorders are very rare. In this environment social pressures may lead some people to diet excessively and eventually develop anorexia.

Control

Dieting can be a means of gaining control over at least one aspect of our lives. Eating disorders sometimes develop because people feel they have no other means of control.

Puberty

Being underweight can be a way to halt physical development and put off some of the demands of being a maturing adult, especially sexual demands.

In a similar way, being overweight can be used as a means of avoiding developing relationships.



Family

The eating, preparing and sharing of food is often used in families as a means of expressing, giving and receiving love. If family relationships are difficult, excessive eating patterns may be a way to express anger or hurt.

Stress and depression

Food can often be used as a way of providing comfort or relieving boredom, or emptiness.

Many people who develop eating disorders are using food as a way of coping with feeling unhappy. The problem is food only provides a temporary solution.

Life changes

Eating disorders can sometimes be triggered by an upsetting event, which lowers self-esteem e.g. the break up of a relationship. Sometimes the trigger can be a life change, such as getting married or leaving home. Although these events can be positive they do require a degree of self-confidence and positive self-esteem.

Recognition

The first step toward seeking help with an eating disorder, is to recognise it.

The longer eating disorders remain unrecognised the worse the problem gets and it then becomes increasingly more difficult for others to help.

Some eating disorders are life threatening, so it is not wise to hope that the problem will simply go away.

Seeking help

There are various forms of help available for eating disorders. A counsellor can support you in recognising the problem and taking the first step. Often the first step is to be seen by a GP, sometimes a GP will refer you to a psychologist or psychiatrist. It may be more appropriate for you to see a counsellor.

People with eating disorders will only be admitted to hospital if their weight loss is very severe.

If you would like an appointment to see a counsellor please ask your manager/HR to make a referral.

Further information:

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