

# what is an eating disorder?

## **An eating disorder is a diagnosed type of disordered eating.**

A person experiences disordered eating when they have an unhealthy relationship with food and eating. These habits and behaviours can lead to the development of an eating disorder, which impact every aspect of someone's life.

*We can all experience unhealthy eating habits from time to time.*

Unhealthy eating habits can come and go, but for some people, they can become a real problem. Extreme concerns about weight or how our body looks, are a sign that it's time to seek support.

Disordered eating often begins with dieting or over-exercising, but many 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, wanting to do things perfectly all the time or having an unrealistic perception of what their body looks like or should look like
- outside factors – like the influence of the media and social pressures to look a certain way
- life factors – like feeling overwhelmed and stressed by exams, work or relationships.

## **What to do if you think you experience disordered eating**

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. Eating disorders are a serious – and times life-threatening – health issue.

If you're having problems with disordered eating or body image, it's important to seek professional support. The earlier you get support, the quicker you can start recovering.

## **What are the symptoms and warning signs?**

The most common signs of disordered eating are:

### **Changes in behaviour**

- using food as a way to manage or express emotions
- repetitive or obsessive dieting
- binge eating

### **Changes in thoughts and feelings**

- thinking and talking about food, weight and body appearance a lot of the time
- feeling out of control in relation to eating patterns
- worrying about places that involve food and eating
- preoccupation with exercise or body building
- feeling guilt and or shame about eating patterns
- fearing gaining weight
- difficulty concentrating

### **Changes in the body**

- often feeling tired and low in energy

People will experience these symptoms differently. It's important to seek professional support to make sense of them. Talking to a GP (General Practitioner) or someone that you trust – like a family member or friend – can help.

## Common types of eating disorders

People with any body type can experience eating disorders. Eating disorders don't always affect body weight.

### Anorexia nervosa

Anorexia nervosa is when a person experiences all of the following:

- getting less energy (food) than their body requires to maintain health
- having an intense fear of gaining weight
- seeing 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.

Many people may change between these types.

### Bulimia nervosa

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.

### Binge eating disorder

Binge eating disorder involves repeated episodes of binge-eating, often with a sense of loss of control while eating.

### Avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder

A person may avoid eating certain foods based on the sensory characteristics such as the smell, appearance or texture. This can lead to unintentional weight loss and other issues with nutrition and physical health.

### Other specific feeding or eating disorders

Is used to describe an eating disorder that significantly impacts a person's life, but does not meet full criteria for one of the other types of eating disorder.

For more info about eating disorders visit The Butterfly Foundation or the InsideOut Institute. [butterfly.org.au](http://butterfly.org.au) or [insideoutinstitute.org.au](http://insideoutinstitute.org.au)

## What are the related mental health problems?

Young people experiencing eating disorders are more likely to have these other mental health difficulties also:

- anxiety
- neurodevelopmental disorders (such as ADHD, conduct disorder, oppositional defiance disorder)
- substance use disorders
- self harming behaviours and suicidal thinking.

## Self-help tips to support recovery

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

**Our headspace clinicians provided their tips for helping young people recover, here's what they recommend:**

### Seek support from people you trust

Knowing that you're not alone on your recovery journey can be really powerful. Reach out for support from a close friend, family member, school counsellor or others who have experienced an eating disorder in online support groups, like The Butterfly Foundation and the InsideOut Institute.

Try to be open about your feelings – these might include feelings of anger, fear, exhaustion, guilt, shame – they are all part of being human. Being open and honest about these feelings with supportive people can help to remind you that you're not alone, and to find self-acceptance.

### Reconnect with who you are

Disordered eating can be tough and at times you might forget there is more to you than these challenges. Reconnecting with the other parts of you can help to build up your identity 'outside' of the disorder. Part of the recovery process can be getting to know yourself again, or even re-defining yourself in some ways. Try getting back into things you used to enjoy or experiment with new things.

### 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. Keep a 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 have, even if they're small. Show yourself a lot of love and pride throughout these wins.



## How can I get help?

It can be a good idea to see a GP (General Practitioner) who can help support you with your physical health needs as well as assist you in accessing the right mental health support.

You can make an appointment to chat to someone at your local headspace centre, or find online and phone support at [headspace.org.au](http://headspace.org.au). Your school, university or workplace might also have a counselling or student wellbeing service.

### Other useful websites

- The Butterfly Foundation – resources, phone, email, and live webchat support. [butterfly.org.au](http://butterfly.org.au)
- InsideOut Institute – information about eating disorders. [insideoutinstitute.org.au](http://insideoutinstitute.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.**

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