

Do I Have an Eating Disorder?

Eating disorders are complex mental illnesses. Anyone, no matter what their age, gender, or background, can develop one. Some examples of eating disorders include bulimia, binge eating disorder, and anorexia. There's no single cause and people might not have all symptoms for any one eating disorder. Many people are diagnosed with "other specified feeding or eating disorder" (OSFED), which means that their symptoms don't exactly match what doctors check for to diagnose binge eating disorder, anorexia, or bulimia, but doesn't mean that it's not still very serious.

It's also possible for someone's symptoms, and therefore their diagnosis, to change over time. For example, someone could have anorexia, but their symptoms could later change so that a diagnosis of bulimia would be more appropriate.

Could you have an eating disorder?

If you haven't had reason to know much about eating disorders previously, it may be that your understanding of them is based on the way they're shown in the media, for example. This often portrays a particular type of story in terms of who gets eating disorders, what causes them, and what the symptoms are. This doesn't necessarily reflect the full spectrum of eating disorders and people who can develop them.

- Studies suggest around a quarter of people with eating disorders are male.
- According to a study (Fairburn & Harrison 2003), 80-85% of people with eating disorders are not underweight.
- Stereotypes about who gets eating disorders might make them even harder to spot among older people, men and boys, and ethnic and cultural minority groups. The real number of sufferers overall could be much higher than we think, but particularly among groups like these.

Your circumstances, feelings, and symptoms may be very different to what you've seen or read about, but that doesn't mean you can't have an eating disorder. The way eating disorders present themselves can be hugely varied from person to person. This means eating disorders can be difficult to identify, and often those suffering can appear healthy despite being unwell. If you think you might be having problems with your eating or feel that difficult feelings or situations are making you change your eating habits or feel differently about food, you could have an eating disorder or be developing one.

Eating disorders can be a way of coping with feelings or situations that are making the person unhappy, angry, depressed, stressed, or anxious. They are not the fault of the person suffering, and no one chooses to have an eating disorder.

Sometimes people worry about talking to someone because they feel their eating disorder isn't serious enough, they don't want to worry people or waste their time, or because they feel guilty, embarrassed or ashamed. But no matter whether your eating difficulties began recently, you've been struggling for a while, or you were treated for an eating disorder in the past that you think might be coming back, you deserve to have your concerns acknowledged respectfully, to be taken seriously and to be supported in the same way as if you were affected by any other illness.

How do I tell someone I have an eating disorder?

Before you talk to someone, you could prepare by writing down what you want to say. It might be helpful to think about:

- The thoughts and feelings affecting your eating.
- How long the eating difficulties have been going on.
- What the person you're talking to could do to support you in getting appropriate help.

If a chat in person works for you, that's great! If it doesn't, you could write what you want to say and read it aloud, send the person an email, phone them, speak to them using text or online messaging... Each way of starting the discussion has its pros and cons – it's about what feels comfortable for you and how you think you'll have the most productive conversation.

If you're not sure who to speak to, think about who you could potentially talk to: trusted friends and family members, healthcare professionals, even teachers or colleagues.

- Is there anyone you've discussed mental health with before, or heard talking about mental health or other difficult subjects in a sensitive way?
- Is there anyone who might have some personal understanding of eating disorders or other mental health issues, and would be able to talk with you about what you're going through in a positive way?
- Is there anyone you've been able to confide in before?
- Is there anyone with whom someone else you know has discussed similar issues?

It's normal to feel scared at the idea of telling someone about your eating disorder. But we hear from so many people who say that, while it was difficult, it was also a big relief to have someone else know what they're going through.

How can I talk to someone if I'm struggling to let go of the eating disorder?

People often feel conflicted about their recovery. Please know you're not alone in finding it difficult to let go of the eating disorder, and even if it means you slip a little in your recovery, this is not a sign of failure or that you're back to where you were. The fact that you've recognised this feeling is important. Equally important is ensuring you're supported to move forward in your recovery.

Be honest with the people supporting you about how you're feeling – if they have been supportive this far into your treatment, they are going to want to help you recover fully. Ultimately, they will much rather you tell them you're struggling than keep it to yourself. If you can think of what would help you stay engaged with your treatment, let them know – for example, it might help to have them regularly check in with how you're feeling, talk with you about your reasons for wanting to recover, or explore different treatment options with you if you don't feel your current treatment is effective.