

Information Sheet - Institute of Welfare

Eating Disorders

When most people hear of someone with an eating disorder they almost automatically assume the person has a problem with food. Eating disorders are not a sign that a person has a problem with food; rather eating disorders are actually only the symptoms of underlying problems in that person's life. With proper treatment, people can fully recover.

This section will provide you with definitions, of the following: anorexia nervosa; bulimia nervosa; binge eating disorder; and compulsive eating.

Anorexia Nervosa

Anorexia is characterized by a significant weight loss resulting from excessive dieting. Most women and an increasing number of men are motivated by the strong desire to be thin and a fear of becoming obese. Anorexics consider themselves to be fat, no matter what their actual weight is. Often anorexics do not recognize they are underweight and may still "feel fat" at 80 lbs. Anorexics close to death will show you on their bodies where they feel they need to lose weight. In their attempts to become even thinner, the anorexic will avoid food and taking in calories at all costs, which can result in death. An estimated 10 to 20% will eventually die from complications related to it.

Anorexics usually have low self-esteem and sometimes feel they don't deserve to eat. The anorexics usually deny that anything is wrong. Hunger is strongly denied. They usually resist any attempts to help them because the idea of therapy is seen only as a way to force them to eat. Once they admit they have a problem and are willing to seek help, they can be treated effectively through a combination of psychological, nutritional and medical care.

Bulimia Nervosa

Bulimia is characterized by a cycle of binge eating followed by purging to try and rid the body of unwanted calories. A binge is different for all individuals. For one person a binge may range from 1000 to 10000 calories, for another, one cookie may be considered a binge. Purging methods usually involve vomiting and laxative abuse. Other forms of purging can involve excessive exercise, fasting, use of diuretics, diet pills and enemas.

Bulimics are usually people that do not feel secure about their own self worth. They usually strive for the approval of others. They tend to do whatever they can to please others, while hiding their own feelings. Food becomes their only source of comfort. Bulimia also serves as a function for blocking or letting out feelings. Unlike anorexics, bulimics do realize they have a problem and are more likely to seek help.

Binge Eating Disorders

Binge eating disorder is characterized by consuming large quantities of food in a very short period of time until the individual is uncomfortably full. Binge eating disorder is much like bulimia except the individuals do not use any form of purging (i.e. vomiting, laxatives, fasting, etc.) following a binge. Individuals usually feel out of control during a binge episode, followed by feelings of guilt and shame. Many individuals who suffer with binge eating disorder use food as a way to cope with or block out feelings and emotions they do not want to feel. Individuals can also use food as a way to numb themselves, to cope with daily life stressors, to provide comfort to themselves or fill a void they feel within. Like all eating disorders, binge eating is a serious problem but can be overcome through proper treatment.

Compulsive Overeating

Compulsive overeating is characterized by uncontrollable eating and consequent weight gain. Compulsive overeaters use food as a way to cope with stress, emotional conflicts and daily problems. The food can block out feelings and emotions. Compulsive overeaters usually feel out of control and are aware their eating patterns are abnormal. Like bulimics, compulsive overeaters do recognize they have a problem.

Compulsive overeating usually starts in early childhood when eating patterns are formed. Most people who become compulsive eaters are people who never learned the proper way to deal with stressful situations and used food instead as a way of coping. Fat can also serve as a protective function for them, especially in people that have been victims of sexual abuse. They sometimes feel that being overweight will keep others at a distance and make them less attractive. Unlike anorexia and bulimia, there are a high proportion of male overeaters.

The more weight that is gained, the harder they try to diet and dieting is usually what leads to the next binge, which can be followed by feelings of powerlessness, guilt, shame and failure. Dieting and bingeing can go on forever if the emotional reasons for the bingeing are not dealt with.

Like anorexia and bulimia, compulsive overeating is a serious problem and can result in death. With the proper treatment, which should include therapy, medical and nutritional counselling, it can be overcome.