



EATING DISORDERS

DISORDERED EATING

It would be easy to assume that someone with disordered eating has just got a problem with food. However, disordered eating is usually the symptom of underlying problems in that person's life.

Disordered eating develops as an outward sign of inner emotional or psychological distress or problems. It becomes the way that people cope with difficulties in their life. Eating or not eating is used to help block out painful feelings.

Anyone can develop disordered eating regardless of age, race, gender or background. Young women are most vulnerable, particularly between the ages of 15-24 years. Traumatic events can trigger an disordered eating, for example bereavement, being bullied or sexually abused or upheaval or tension in the family (such as divorce). Someone with a long-term illness or disability, for instance diabetes, bipolar disorder or deafness, may also experience eating problems.

Starting university can also be a trigger for disordered eating. When entering university, people experience many different conflicting feelings and emotions. Not all of these feelings are positive. Issues around independent living, finances, relationships and academia can be stressful.

Some of the common examples of disordered eating are:

Anorexia Nervosa

A significant weight loss resulting from excessive dieting and/or exercise. The person is motivated by a strong desire to be thin and fear of becoming obese. People with anorexia consider themselves to be fat, no matter what their actual weight is.

Bulimia Nervosa

Bulimia is characterised by a cycle of binge eating followed by purging to try and rid the body of unwanted calories. Purging methods usually involve vomiting and laxative abuse, but can include excessive exercise, fasting and use of diet pills.

Binge Eating

Consuming large quantities of food in a very short period of time until the person is uncomfortably full. Individuals usually feel out of control during a binge episode, followed by guilt and shame. Often individuals use food to cope with or block out feelings and emotions they do not want to feel. Food is used to numb



these feelings, to cope with daily life stresses, to provide comfort, or fill a void they feel within.

Compulsive Eating

Uncontrollable eating and consequent weight gain. Compulsive overeating usually starts in early childhood when eating patterns are formed. Most people affected by compulsive eating have yet to develop effective skills for dealing with stressful situations. They use 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 think that being overweight will keep others at a distance and make them less attractive.

The more weight that is gained, the harder they try to diet. Dieting can lead to another binge which brings 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.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF DISORDERED EATING

- Noticeable weight loss or gain
- Excessive exercise
- Fatigue
- Obsession with food, calories, recipes
- Excuses for not eating meals/difficulty eating in public
- Restricting food choices to only diet foods
- Guilt or shame about eating
- Depression, anxiety, irritability, mood swings
- Vomiting, laxative abuse, diet pills, etc
- Headaches
- Feelings of self worth determined by what is or not eaten
- Belief that life will get better if you lose weight
- Low self esteem
- Issues of control around eating
- Feeling tormented by eating habits
- Weight is focus of life

At university when stress can be all-consuming, some students may develop disordered eating as a diversion technique.

If they spend all their time focusing on calories and their weight, they don't have time to think about anything else.

Others may develop disordered eating as a way to deal with the pressures and all the emotions that they are experiencing. If they are experiencing troubling emotions, food can bring them a temporary sense of security. When they binge, all the negative feelings they are experiencing disappear. Purging may help them to feel like they are releasing all those feelings.

Since food can only bring temporary relief from the negative feelings, the binge/purge cycle will continue.



GETTING HELP

How to make contact:

To make an initial appointment you can come to the Student Enquiry Zone (SEZ), Level 1, The Library Building and ask to see one of our counsellors or Mental Health Nurse Advisors,

email: counselling@abertay.ac.uk

The Student Counselling & Mental Health Service is open Monday to Friday, 9.00am - 5.00pm including most holiday periods (closed at Christmas).

One of the hardest things to do is admitting and accepting that you have disordered eating. It can also be hard to reach out and ask for help. Many of us feel that since this is our problem that we should deal with it on our own. People with disordered eating are very independent and are not used to sharing their feelings with anyone, especially not a counsellor. They may feel too ashamed or embarrassed to reveal to someone what they are doing.

It is important that you find ways that are helpful for you. Seeing your GP can offer help and advice. They also can refer you to specialist professionals, like psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, counsellors, dieticians and nutritionists. It may not be possible to access this support without seeing a doctor. If you find it difficult to talk to your GP it may be possible to talk to the practice nurse.



The internet is a valuable source for information about disordered eating and services.

Message boards and chat rooms can be used to provide and receive support for each other. Particularly useful websites are:

Beat Eating Disorders

Formerly Eating Disorders Association Charity with good information and support.

<https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/>

The National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA)

The major UK organisation for this problem

<http://www.edauk.com/>

NHS information on eating disorders

<https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/feelings-symptoms-behaviours/behaviours/eating-disorders/overview/>

Each of these sites includes information on recommended books and articles. There are many useful books on the market.

If you are considering entering counselling as a way of coping with your disordered eating, a book you might find helpful is:

Julia Buckroyd's Eating your Heart Out: Understanding and overcoming eating disorders, 2nd edn., Optima, 1994

EQUALITY STATEMENT

The University believes that all employees and students have the right to expect, and that it has a responsibility to ensure, that no individual will be disadvantaged as a consequence of their age; disability; gender

reassignment, marriage and civil partnership; pregnancy and maternity; race (including colour, nationality and ethnic or national origins); religion or belief; sex; or sexual orientation.

The University Equality Policy can be found at:

<http://www.abertay.ac.uk/about/theuni/diversity/>

[abertay.ac.uk](http://www.abertay.ac.uk)

Counselling & Mental Health Service

Contact:

Student Enquiry Zone (SEZ)

Level 1

The Library Building,

Abertay University, Bell Street,

Dundee DD1 1HG

E-mail: counselling@abertay.ac.uk



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can be found at:

[http://www.abertay.ac.uk/about/
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