

UNDERSTANDING EATING DISORDERS

Being worried about your body shape or weight or the appearance of your body is quite common. But sometimes this type of thinking becomes a problem. It can lead to distorted views of body shape and size and unhealthy eating. These problems go hand-in-hand with anxiety and depression and are to do with negative feelings and low self-esteem.

WHAT IS BODY IMAGE?

Body image is how a person sees, thinks and feels about their physical appearance. How a person looks is only a small part of who they are and what they can give.

But body image is the number one concern for many young people in Australia.¹ When body image becomes a focus, people may overestimate their size or weight or think that their muscles should be bigger. When body image becomes confused with personality and self-worth, it may mean that there is a deeper problem that could lead to an eating disorder.

WHAT ARE EATING DISORDERS?

Eating disorders aren't just about food – they are illnesses that also involve body image, mental health and other parts of life.

In Australia, one in four people knows someone who has experienced an eating disorder,² which gives an idea of just how common these problems are. Eating disorders usually begin in the late teenage years, but can start at any age and continue into adulthood.

Eating disorders are usually related to emotional issues such as control and self-esteem. They are often a way of avoiding thinking about the real problems. There are usually a number of factors that contribute to them. These can be things that have happened to you, such as difficult relationships with friends or family, physical, emotional or sexual abuse, loss and grief, stress, or feeling that you've lost control over life.

TYPES OF EATING DISORDER

Anorexia nervosa is to do with extreme concerns about weight, fear of gaining weight or becoming fat, and deliberately keeping a very low body weight (by limiting the amount of food eaten or by over-exercising). Although they are usually underweight, people with anorexia generally believe they are 'fat'.

SYMPTOMS OF EATING DISORDERS

Eating disorders are mental illnesses. They don't only affect people's physical health and how they eat or look, they also affect how they feel, behave and interact with others.

Emotional or psychological symptoms

- Thinking and talking a lot about body image, body weight and food.
- Becoming irritable or withdrawing from family and friends.
- Feeling depressed or anxious.
- Being sensitive to criticism, or feeling guilty.
- Having difficulty concentrating.
- Having problems with relationships.
- Having suicidal thoughts or behaviour.

Behaviours

- Dieting or overeating excessively.
- Eating very quickly or very slowly.
- Eating only certain types and amounts of food.
- Avoiding social situations that involve food.
- 'Playing' with food rather than eating it.
- Going to the bathroom straight after meals.
- Wearing loose fitting clothes to hide weight loss.
- Exercising excessively.

Visit: www.youthbeyondblue.com

Info line: **1300 22 4636**

beyondblue: the national depression initiative



WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF EATING DISORDERS?

Having an unhealthy body image and experiencing an eating disorder can damage your self-esteem and seriously interfere with your life. It is not clear which comes first, but most people who have eating disorders will also experience anxiety or depression at some stage in their illness. Eating disorders can also lead to irritability and moodiness, finding it hard to concentrate, or taking drugs.



KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER

- People come in all shapes and sizes – very few people are in the height and weight range of models.
- Most models don't really look like they do in magazines – many photos are altered digitally, or with airbrushing or lighting.
- An unhealthy body image can damage your self-esteem.
- Body image and eating disorders are mental health problems that need to be treated.
- Try to stay positive and take small steps towards the bigger goal of getting better.
- Treatment can be very effective and life can become enjoyable again.

Seek help from a doctor if you are:

- eating when you're not hungry
- feeling guilty about eating
- thinking about your body image so much that it affects your daily life.

Physical effects of eating disorders include: weight loss or gain; faintness, dizziness or tiredness; dry, brittle hair, skin and nails; constipation, diarrhoea or cramps; and in girls stopping of periods. Eating disorders also cause serious health problems like weakening of the bones, kidney problems, headaches, constipation or diarrhoea, fainting and heart problems. In severe cases, people can end up in hospital and may even die.

TAKING ACTION

Many people try to hide their eating disorders. But getting help quickly is important. If you think you have an eating disorder it's important to talk about it honestly and openly.

A doctor or counsellor can help you to explore your beliefs and behaviours about weight, and how you feel about yourself. They can guide you in finding better ways of managing your feelings and having a healthier and more positive approach to yourself, food and weight.

Giving yourself a new focus can also help. This might mean finding a new interest or taking up a hobby. Spending time with people who are positive and supportive can also help you along the way. Talking to someone who has recovered from an eating disorder can be especially helpful.

Recovery time is quicker for some people than for others, and the old feelings and behaviours may come back. Some people find that when they let go of their eating disorder, they experience other mental health problems such as depression or anxiety. It may be that these problems were always there and the eating disorder was a way to cope with them. If this happens to you, it's important to talk to your doctor and work out the underlying cause.



MORE INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

You can speak to trained counsellors by phoning these 24-hour telephone counselling services:

Lifeline 13 11 14 (cost of a local call)

Kids Help Line 1800 55 1800 (freecall)

Information and support is also available from the following websites:

beyondblue www.youthbeyondblue.com
or www.beyondblue.org.au

Information on depression, anxiety and how to help a friend

headspace www.headspace.org.au
Information, support and help near you

ReachOut.com www.reachout.com
Information and support for young people going through tough times

Australia & New Zealand Academy for Eating Disorders www.anzaed.org.au
Information on eating disorders (see Resources)

National LGBT Health Alliance
www.lgbthealth.org.au Information and support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and other sexuality, sex and gender diverse people (LGBT)

The websites below can help you to find health services in your area. They list services that are either free of charge or low cost:

Kids Help Line www.kidshelp.com.au

Lifeline Service Finder
www.lifeline.org.au/service_finder

If you or a friend want to communicate with someone via email or online, Kids Help Line offers confidential, non-judgemental, emotional support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

SOURCES

This fact sheet is based on the following sources:

- Mission Australia (2008) National Survey of Young Australians. Key and Emerging Issues.
- Victorian Centre of Excellence in Eating Disorders & Eating Disorders Foundation of Victoria (2004) *An Eating Disorders Resource for Schools. A Manual to Promote Early Intervention and Prevention of Eating Disorders in Schools.*
- Eating Disorders Foundation of Victoria Inc www.eatingdisorders.org.au
- headspace (National Youth Mental Health Foundation) www.headspace.org.au
- Hightet NJ, Thompson M (2004) Research Update: The Impact of Living with Eating Disorders - Carers' Perspectives. *beyondblue: the national depression initiative* & The Network for Carers of People with a Mental Illness.
- ReachOut.com www.reachout.com
- Russell S, Fuscaldolo G, Ealey W (2008) Eating Disorders with Comorbid Depression and Anxiety. Literature Review. Beyond Blue Limited, Melbourne.

Visit: www.youthbeyondblue.com

Info line: **1300 22 4636**

beyondblue: the national depression initiative

