

### **What are eating disorders?**

Eating disorders are mental illnesses with a genetic base. They are activated by anything that causes a caloric deficit or negative energy imbalance within a person who has the genetic predisposition to having one. If left untreated eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any psychiatric disorder. Eating disorders are not a choice, they are a mental illness. Eating disorders can affect any person, of any gender, any age, and any race.

### **Why is a person with an eating disorder scared of food?**

The eating disorder has affected the part of their brain that generates the fight or flight response (HPA) axis and makes it fire when they are about to eat food. This means that for a person with an eating disorder, the sight of food and eating is often as terrifying as doing something like jumping out of a plane or touching a poisonous snake.

### **Why do people with eating disorders often get stressed?**

Stress and irritability are symptom of malnutrition. When the sufferer is weight restored they should become less stressed. Sufferers also experience a great deal of anxiety during and after weight gain. This anxiety can be very intense, so efforts should be made to reduce it via positive reinforcement about eating food.

### **What is the treatment for eating disorders?**

Family-based therapy (FBT) has the most evidence of positive outcomes of all types of treatment. In a nutshell this treatment with food. This involves supported mealtimes where the sufferer has to eat what is given to them by whomever is their caregiver. It is very important that during recovery a sufferer does not miss a mealtime and eats very frequently.

### **Signs of an eating disorder**

- Abnormal eating habits and changes in eating behaviours
- Obsession with food and exercise
- Excessive exercise and compulsion to exercise
- Binging and purging behaviour
- Weight loss
- Thinning hair
- Hair on arms and neck area
- Personality changes such as becoming more reclusive and unsocial
- Increased anxiety and general irritability
- Increased interest in diets and exercise

- Obsession with "healthy" foods and supplements
- Sudden interest in cooking programs and cook books
- Changed money spending patterns
- Loss of period in women
- Secret eating and hiding foods
- Telling lies about food and exercise
- Increased anger especially around being asked to eat
- Inability to recognise the eating disorder
- Resistance to changing behaviours

These symptoms are just the tip of the iceberg. Eating disorders like to hide, and often the sufferer is resistant to being told that they have a problem. The levels of anxiety that the sufferer feels can be crippling, as can the levels of panic and fear.

### **Key Points for Helping a Person with an Eating Disorder**

- Understand that they are experiencing incredibly high levels of fear and anxiety at mealtimes and often throughout the day.
- Know that weight restoration has to be the priority for a person who is underweight.
- Refrain from any diet or health and fitness talk that might make a sufferer feel like dieting or exercising more is a good thing.
- Refrain from any sort of fat shaming, negatively talking about gaining weight, or positive talk about losing weight. This includes talk about your own self, other friends or family, even celebrities. Enhancing the "thin ideal" that society projects is very dangerous when you are around a person who has an eating disorder.
- If the sufferer is working with a caregiver around meal support, do not intervene. The caregiver knows what is best, and it can be confusing for the sufferer if you challenge them. An example would be if the caregiver wants the sufferer to eat more, and you voice your opinion "no, she/he has eaten enough, surely?" This gives the sufferer a mixed message and doesn't help.
- Understand that the illness makes the sufferer incredibly stressed and reactive. If they act this way around you, do not take it personally.
- Do not assume that a person is "better" just because they have gained weight. It takes years to recover fully in most cases. When a person initially gains weight this is a good sign, and most sufferers actually need to go past their pre-illness weight in order to recover fully. This means that weight gain should still be encouraged even if a person looks healthy again. It also means

that no diet or calorie cutting talk should be allowed when you are with this person.

- Remember that even when a person is weight restored, anxiety and fear levels can be very high for them for some time after. Support them and continue to encourage them by not talking about diets and weight loss during this time. Do not assume a person is "better" just because they look better.

### **What should you avoid saying/doing when with a person with an eating disorder?**

Unless the sufferer tells you otherwise, you should avoid the following:

- Any comments whatsoever about the sufferers weight.
- Do not tell them that they "look well," or "look better," or "look healthy," instead, if you must compliment them on greeting play it safe by commenting on clothes or hairstyle. Steer clear from anything else.
- Never tell them they have eaten a lot or too much.
- Never talk about your most recent diet or exercise program.
- Do not talk about restrictive diets such as being vegan, gluten or dairy free, or avoiding certain food groups such as carbohydrates. This will undoubtedly trigger eating disorder thoughts for the sufferer.
- If it is a mealtime, eat a good sized meal yourself. It is helpful if the sufferer sees other people eating a good amount of food.
- Never say after a meal that you feel like you have eaten too much — the sufferer will already be having their own post-meal anxiety and you will add to it if you say things like this.
- Avoid comments such as "I need to go for a run to work that off," or "I feel bad after eating that chocolate."
- About other people: do not make weight related comments such as "she looks so much better for losing weight."

Eating disorders are very complicated mental illnesses. This quick guide is designed to be a very general tool to give to someone who is not a primary caregiver, but is a friend or relative of a person with an eating disorder.

Primary caregivers, partners, spouses, and parents of people with eating disorder can find much more in depth resources at [tabithafarrar.com](http://tabithafarrar.com).

## **Resources and further reading**

[Blog](#)

[Eating Disorder Recovery Podcast](#)  
[Recovery Guides](#)