

Information for Service Users & Carers

Understanding Eating Disorders

What are eating disorders?

We all have different eating habits and there are a large number of "eating styles" which can allow us to stay healthy. However, there are some which are driven by an intense fear of becoming fat and actually damage our health. These are called "eating disorders" and involve eating too much, eating too little and / or using harmful ways to get rid of calories.

A lot of people want to be thinner even if they are not over weight in the first place. They often try to lose weight by dieting or skipping meals, for some, worries about weight becomes an obsession which can result in a serious eating disorder. Eating disorders are common in women and teenage girls but do occur in men and teenage boys from all backgrounds and cultures.

Sufferers use their eating disorder to cope with emotional problems, low self esteem and as a way of coping with stressful life situations. Their eating disorder provides them with a sense of being 'in control', and that by losing weight they believe their lives will be happier, they will be liked more and more successful.

When eating disorders are talked about most people think of **Anorexia Nervosa** or **Bulimia Nervosa**, they don't think about **Binge-Eating Disorder** or **Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (EDNOS)**. Within this leaflet we want to provide some basic information on the types of eating disorders, the causes, the signs, the effects and how to get help for an eating disorder.

- **Anorexia Nervosa**

Where sufferers starve themselves, lose weight to 15% or more below normal body weight, are terrified of weight gain, and in woman have a loss of periods however this may not be present (e.g. for woman on the contraceptive pill) and is not a necessary requirement for diagnosis. Some people with Anorexia also binge and purge.

- **Bulimia Nervosa**

Where sufferers binge-eat and then induce vomiting, abuse laxatives or other weight control drugs, exercise excessively or starve in order to compensate for the bingeing. Sufferers are very concerned about weight and shape, but stay within the normal weight range.

- **Binge Eating Disorder**

Where sufferers binge-eat but do not carry out any compensatory behaviour's such as induced vomiting, laxative use or excessive exercise. Their body weight may increase above normal ranges (obesity is not classified as an eating disorder).

- **Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (EDNOS)**

Where sufferers have many of the above symptoms but do not meet the criteria for anorexia, bulimia or binge eating disorder.

What are the effects of an eating disorder?

Eating disorders have severe effects on sufferer's physical and psychological health and also impact their social functioning.

Physical effects include:-

- Circulatory Problems
- Electrolyte Imbalance
- Gastric Problems
- Bowel Damage
- Stunted Growth

- Infertility
- Kidney Failure
- Heart Failure
- Osteoporosis
- Dental Enamel Erosion

Psychological effects include:-

- Impaired Cognitive Functioning
- Reduced Capacity
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Obsessive Behaviours
- Drug Abuse
- Self Harm

Social effects include:-

- Erratic Behaviours
- Social Withdrawal
- Debt
- Shoplifting
- Damage to Relationships

What Causes Eating Disorders?

It is difficult to name just one cause for developing an eating disorder as all sufferers have their own experiences, however there are similarities.

Factors that can increase the risk of an individual developing an eating disorder include:

- Family history of eating disorders
- Experiencing criticism for their eating habits, body shape and weight
- Overly concerned with body shape and weight, particularly if combined with pressures from society
- Personality traits e.g. obsessive personality, anxiety disorder, low self esteem, perfectionism

- Negative life experiences such as abuse (physical or emotional) or bereavement
- Difficult relationships with family and friends
- Experiencing stressful situations e.g. in work or school

Getting Help

It is often family members/friends/teachers or others in close contact with the individual to notice symptoms and gently challenge them. However, this can be met with denial and anger and the experience can feel unbearable.

The first step is seeing your GP, who can assess physical health. They may also refer on to other professionals. The type of help and treatment can vary from region to region in Wales but all health professionals work from guidance called "NICE guidelines" (National Institute Clinical Excellence) which recommend best practice and treatment, a downloadable leaflet tells you what treatment you can expect from your GP and other NHS services. www.nice.org.uk

- Beat – UK charity for people with eating disorders

Website: www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk

Helpline: 0808 801 0677