



understanding disordered eating and eating disorders

Disordered eating is when a person experiences an unhealthy relationship with food or eating.

Disordered eating can include skipping meals, binge eating, or following a strict diet. A person who experiences disordered eating may also try to 'make up' for breaking diets by exercising or vomiting.

Disordered eating habits and behaviours can lead to the development of an eating disorder. They can impact every aspect of a person's life.

We can all experience unhealthy eating habits from time to time.

Unhealthy eating habits can come and go, but for some people, they can become a real problem. These behaviours, or extreme concerns about weight or how our body looks, are a sign that it's time to seek support.

Disordered eating often begins with dieting or over-exercising, but lots of other factors can increase the risk that this may develop into an eating disorder.

These include:

- **individual factors** – such as believing you're not good enough, wanting to do things perfectly all the time, or having an unrealistic perception of what their body looks like or should look like
- **family factors** – like a family history of eating disorders
- **outside factors** – like the influence of the media and social pressures to look a certain way
- **life factors** – certain stressors like exams, work, relationships and feeling overwhelmed.

Eating disorders are a serious health issue, damaging and at times even life-threatening. If you're having problems with disordered eating or body image, it's important to seek professional support. The sooner you ask for help, the faster your recovery will be.

What are the symptoms and warning signs?

The most common signs of disordered eating are:

Changes in behaviour

- using food as a way to manage or express emotions
- repetitive or obsessive dieting
- binge eating.

Changes in thoughts and feelings

- thinking and talking about food, weight and body appearance a lot of the time
- feeling out of control in relation to eating patterns
- worrying about places that involve food, eating, eating in front of others
- preoccupation with exercise or body building
- feeling guilt and or shame about eating patterns
- fearing gaining weight
- difficulty concentrating.

Changes in the body

- often feeling tired and low in energy.



People will experience these symptoms differently. It's important to seek professional support to make sense of them. Talking to a GP (General Practitioner) or someone that you trust – like a trusted family member, friend, Elder, or counsellor – can help.



Common types of eating disorders

An eating disorder is a diagnosed type of disordered eating. People with any body type can experience eating disorders. Eating disorders don't always affect body weight.

Anorexia nervosa

Anorexia nervosa is when a person experiences all of the following:

- getting less energy (food) than their body requires to maintain health
- having an intense fear of gaining weight
- seeing their body size or shape in a distorted and disturbed way.

People experiencing anorexia nervosa also have weight loss and/or are underweight.

There are two types of anorexia nervosa:

- **restrictive** – not eating enough and/or exercising a lot more than food intake
- **binge-purge** – eating (sometimes to excess) and then through some method removing that food (e.g., vomiting or laxatives).

Many people may change between these types.

Bulimia nervosa

Bulimia nervosa involves a cycle of binge eating (eating a large amount of food quickly, in a way that feels uncontrolled), followed by actions to get rid of the food eaten.

People experiencing bulimia nervosa usually have strong feelings of distress, guilt and shame about these experiences, and are often very critical of their body.

Binge eating disorder

Binge eating disorder involves repeated episodes of binge eating, often with a sense of loss of control while eating.

Avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder

A person may avoid eating certain foods based on the sensory characteristics such as the smell, appearance or texture. This can lead to issues with nutrition and physical health.

Other specific feeding or eating disorders

An eating disorder that significantly impacts a person's life but doesn't meet the full criteria for one of the other types of eating disorders.

Self-help tips to support recovery

Alongside professional help, if you think you may be developing signs of unhealthy eating habits, there are many things that you can do to help get on top of things.

Seek support from people you trust

Knowing that you're not alone on your recovery journey can be really powerful. Reach out for support from a trusted friend, family member, Elder, school counsellor, or others who have experienced an eating disorder in online support groups, like The Butterfly Foundation and the InsideOut Institute.

Try to be open about your feelings

These might include feelings of anger, fear, exhaustion, guilt, shame – they're all part of being human. Being open and honest about these feelings with supportive people can help to remind you that you're not alone, and to find self-acceptance.

Reconnect with who you are

Disordered eating can be tough and at times you might forget there is more to you than these challenges. Reconnecting with the other parts of you can help to build up your identity 'outside' of the disorder.

Be kind to yourself

Recovery is a journey. It can take some time and it can feel exhausting, so try not to be hard on yourself if things aren't going smoothly. Keep a journal to record your achievements and successes along the way. When you hit a rough patch, looking back at this journal can help keep your energy and motivation up.



What to do if you think you experience disordered eating

Many people with disordered eating may feel that their experiences aren't bad enough, or they aren't 'thin enough' to need professional help.

No matter what a person weighs or how much or little they eat, anybody experiencing unhealthy eating patterns and distress about how they look should seek professional support.

It's a good idea to try to find help sooner rather than later. The earlier you get support, the quicker you can start recovering.



If you or someone you know is going through a tough time you can get help and support from headspace, your school, TAFE or university wellbeing service or your local health provider. For more information, to find your nearest headspace centre, or for online and telephone support, visit [headspace.org.au](https://www.headspace.org.au)

If you need immediate assistance call 000 or to speak to someone urgently, please call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467.

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