

Stuck in a Cycle

Bulimia is perhaps the most powerful of the eating disorders currently labeled by psychologists. Those who suffer from this disorder find themselves stuck in a cycle of unhealthy, dangerous behaviors, unable to break their habits even though they know they are destructive. Sadly, many people don't receive the help they need, either because those close to them don't understand their illness or because they are unaware that anything unusual is going on. Having a general picture of bulimia's features, effects, and causes can help you identify it either in yourself or in someone you know.

Eating Disorders

Bulimia is a very complex disorder, combining many of the features of other mental illnesses. Without a professional exam and diagnosis, it is often difficult to determine whether a person is suffering from bulimia, anorexia, binge eating, or a purely physical disease. As with all eating disorders, parents and authorities should treat bulimia as a serious issue, not simply as a "phase" or as a temporary pattern of unusual behavior. The more researchers study eating disorders, the more they realize the importance of spotting and addressing them as quickly as possible.

Likely Victims

Certain people are more likely to develop bulimia than others. It is far more common in women and girls than in men and boys, and the confusing adolescent years seem to be the most vulnerable. Parents, teachers, and friends can help young people avoid the trap of eating disorders by providing support, comfort, and opportunities to talk about what is going on in their lives. The more lonely and unpopular a person feels, the more likely it is that he or she will fall into unhealthy behavioral patterns.



LEARN MORE

Make smart decisions about your health and visit a physician or health specialist for advice and questions.

National Eating Disorders Association
www.nationaleatingdisorders.org

National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders, Inc.
www.anad.org

BULIMIA



Because bulimia is a complex disorder which combines features with other mental illnesses, professional help is necessary to battle the disease.

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Definition

Bulimia consists of several different behaviors and mindsets.

Unusually Heavy Eating

Unlike anorexia, bulimia prompts a person to eat very large amounts of food in a short amount of time. This binge eating almost always includes unhealthy foods, high in fat and sugar. As with other disorders, a feeling of being out of control usually accompanies eating binges.

Purging Behavior

Purging behaviors may appear on occasion with other eating disorders, but they are central to bulimia. After eating, a bulimic person experiences feelings of guilt and disgust, leading to forced vomiting or using medications to purge the body of food.

Cyclical Actions

Because purging happens immediately after eating, the body does not benefit from the nutrients it consumed. This creates hunger, as the body recognizes that it still needs food. The intense hunger leads to the need for sudden heavy eating, and the cycle begins again. Many bulimic people follow the same cycle multiple times per day for weeks or months.

Causes

Just as the disorder itself is complex, the factors that contribute to bulimia are also complex. Experts have identified certain influences and thought patterns that seem to lead young people toward bulimic activity, but there are almost certainly others that are not well understood.

Cultural Influences

Experts warn against presenting young minds with idealized body types and pressure to look a certain way. As young people dwell on what they view as physical shortcomings, they can become obsessed with doing whatever it takes to reach an unrealistic goal. This unhealthy mindset drives the young person to purge the body of food that might add weight, even as it starves the body and creates a hunger for more food.

Self-Image

Young people who grow up in an unsupportive environment are in greater danger of developing depression, high stress, and low self-esteem. The critical pre-teen and teen years are ones in which the mind needs a stable environment as well as responsible authorities who promote healthy thinking.

Effects

The longer any mental disorder continues, the more entrenched it becomes and the harder it is to beat permanently. The cycle of overeating, self-loathing, and purging does great damage to the mind, and

victims who are able to beat their disorder struggle with self-confidence years later.

The purging element of bulimia is quite destructive to the body's digestive system. The stomach acid in vomit harms the esophagus, mouth, and dental surfaces, sometimes permanently. In addition, the physical act of vomiting puts

a heavy strain on the entire body. Broken blood vessels, skin rashes, and constant digestive problems are clear warning signs that bulimia is taking a toll on the body.

The body needs nutrition to function normally, and purging deprives it of that nutrition. Instead of losing weight, the body develops an uncontrollable hunger for the food it needs, leading directly to binge eating. Extended purging weakens the body and causes dangerous sodium, electrolyte, and other imbalances in the blood.

Solutions

The easiest way to stop bulimia is to prevent it from becoming a problem in the first place. Young people who grow up being encouraged to eat right and exercise will be likely to use those methods rather than developing an eating disorder to lose weight. More importantly, a healthy sense of self-worth and confidence will protect a young person from falling victim to the idea that he or she is a failure by not looking exactly like someone else. Eating disorders stem from depression, stress, and low self-esteem, so nourishing a healthy mindset is essential to

The purging element of bulimia is quite destructive, but it isn't the only damage the disease can cause.

preserving a healthy view of eating and behaving in healthy ways.

The best known method of helping a bulimic individual recover is through therapy. Group therapy is very effective for some, with a strong element of accountability and inclusion in a circle of friends. Others benefit more from intense, one-on-one therapy that corrects behaviors and the thinking patterns that cause them.

Before, during, and after formal therapy, those struggling with bulimia need help from their families and friends. A supportive environment reinforces the truth that form and figure are not the defining features of a person. When they can understand that what's on the outside does not define who they are, they will be on the path to recovery.

