

Eaten Away, From the Inside Out

We all crave a certain amount of authority over our lives. The sense that we have control over what happens to us provides some comfort in an unpredictable world.

But in reality, things happen in life over which we have no control. Parents get divorced. People close to us become sick, or die. Our bodies transform as we mature into adults.

These and other changes can feel overwhelming. Sometimes they result in emotions that seem too big to handle. When our lives feel out of control, we often respond by finding something we can control. It's a way of coping with our uncomfortable feelings.

Eating disorders —manipulating our bodies through extreme weight loss measures—is an unhealthy coping strategy. People with eating disorders respond to overwhelming emotions by controlling what they eat, or don't eat—sometimes with deadly results.

Do you know someone whose exercise schedule has taken over her life? How about a friend who eats only very particular foods, and is never hungry when you go to the mall, or out to dinner? This same friend might always complain that she's fat, even though she's obviously thinner than average—maybe a little too thin. You might also know someone whose weight goes up and down. She'll eat a hot fudge sundae, and then disappear into the bathroom for a long time.



These are symptoms of **anorexia nervosa** and **bulimia nervosa**. People with anorexia restrict their eating, and people with bulimia eat too much, also known as binge eating, and then use self-induced vomiting, laxatives, or excessive exercise in an attempt to get rid of unwanted calories. Both disorders can cause permanent damage to the body and even death. In fact, anorexia has the highest fatality rate of any mental illness.

Eating disorders are caused by a complicated mix of social, psychological, and biological factors. But since we live in a culture that bombards us with messages that we need to be thin in order to be loved and accepted, it's no wonder that so many young people choose extreme weight loss methods as a way of coping. If we all work to judge and value people for who they are inside, instead of how they look, perhaps fewer people will resort to drastic and unhealthy means of changing their bodies.

More About Eating Disorders

www.intheknowzone.com/eatingdisorders



For More Information

Go to www.intheknowzone.com for more information about eating disorders, with citations and links. Test your understanding with a quick quiz.

Don't stay in the dark.
Get In the Know!



Resources

Eating Disorders Awareness and Prevention

www.NationalEatingDisorders.org

1-800-931-2237

Information and national referral helpline.

in the know

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5801 River Road
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Eating Disorders

*starving
for control*



Warning Signs

Anorexia Nervosa

- Failure to maintain a healthy weight.
- Intense fear of becoming fat, even though underweight.
- Distorted body image. For example, seeing oneself as overweight despite being extremely thin.
- Extreme preoccupation with diet, exercise, and/or body image.
- Avoiding meals or social events that involve food.
- Absence of menstrual periods (in girls who have reached puberty).
- Withdrawing socially.

Bulimia Nervosa

- Frequent weight fluctuations.
- Spending long periods of time in the bathroom after meals.
- Use of laxatives or diuretics.
- Excessive exercise.
- Unlike anorexics, bulimics may be average or even above average weight.

More About Warning Signs
www.intheknowzone.com/eatingdisorders/signs



Risk Factors

People from all social classes and ethnic backgrounds suffer from eating disorders. There are factors that increase the risk, although people may develop an eating disorder without having any of these factors present.

- High achiever in school—perfectionist.
- Involvement in an activity that places great importance on body size. For instance, being a model, athlete, dancer, or cheerleader.
- History of abuse, especially sexual abuse.
- Low self-esteem.
- Family or personal history of being overweight and/or dieting.
- Pressure from parents and/or peers to maintain a certain body size or weight.

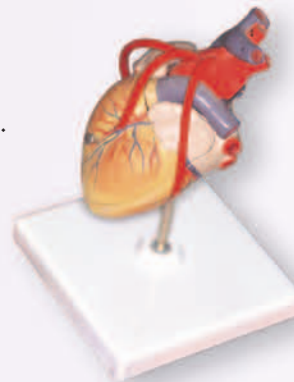
While the majority of people with eating disorders are young women, about 10 percent are men. Because these disorders are less common in men, symptoms often go undetected. Gay men and men who play sports that demand they maintain a certain weight are at higher risk.

Health Consequences

The medical complications from anorexia are mainly a result of starvation, while those from bulimia are caused by purging.

Anorexia Nervosa

- Dangerously low blood pressure, pulse rate and body temperature.
- Anemia and other blood abnormalities.
- Damage to internal organs.
- Weak, brittle bones.
- Infertility.
- Chronic constipation.
- Stunted height.
- Risk of heart attack.



- Growth of fine white hair (lanugo) on the face and body.

Bulimia Nervosa

- Permanent damage and possible rupture of the digestive tract and/or intestines.
- Stained teeth and tooth decay.
- “Chipmunk cheeks” from swollen salivary glands.
- Loss of potassium and electrolytes, which can cause dehydration, irregular heartbeat and heart failure.
- Chronic constipation and irregular bowel movements.

How to Help

Eating disorders are serious psychological and medical problems, not a phase or a case of someone being stubborn. Anorexia and bulimia are treatable, most often with a combination of individual, group and family therapy, nutritional counseling, and sometimes, antidepressant medications. In severe cases, in which a person is literally starving to death, hospitalization may be required. **Early detection and professional treatment are crucial for minimizing the chance of serious long-term problems.**

If you suspect your friend has an eating disorder, there are things you can do to help her get the treatment she needs.

- Find out as much as you can about eating disorders, including resources (counseling, support groups) in your area.

- Pick a quiet, private place to talk to your friend, when you have plenty of time.
- Be specific about your fears. For example, “I notice you avoiding meals and it scares me.”
- Show concern and support. Never blame your friend or force her to seek help.
- Do, however, urge your friend to get treatment. Offer to go with her to appointments.
- Don't be surprised if your friend denies the problem or even gets angry with you. Remember that eating disorders are a way of coping with overwhelming feelings. Your friend may be afraid to give up her only way of dealing with these emotions.
- Be caring and firm. For example, “I understand if you aren't ready to get help, but I'm not going to stop being concerned about you.”
- Avoid both negative and positive comments about your friend's physical appearance. She is overly concerned with this already.
- If your friend seems to be in danger (extremely weak, fainting) tell an adult you trust, such as a parent, teacher, or school nurse. Your friend may need medical attention.

More About How to Help
www.intheknowzone.com/eatingdisorders/help

