

Eating disorders are illnesses with a biological basis and influenced by emotional and cultural factors. The stigma associated with eating disorders has long kept individuals suffering in silence, inhibited funding for crucial research and created barriers to treatment.

— National Eating Disorders Association

# EATING DISORDERS

People with eating disorders battle extreme emotions, attitudes, and behaviors involving food and weight issues. A person appearing of normal size and weight might have an eating disorder.

Although the majority of society suffering from or having past experiences with eating disorders are women, men are victims too. In the United States, 36 million people live with anorexia, bulimia nervosa, and Binge Eating Disorder. Ten million females and 1 million males are fighting for their lives against Anorexia or Bulimia Nervosa. Approximately 25 million people are struggling with Binge Eating Disorder.

Anorexia is the act of self-starvation promoting excessive weight loss. A refusal to maintain healthy body weight stems from fear of weight gain or being "fat."

Regardless of dramatic weight loss, anorexics feel "fat" and visualize themselves heavier than they really are. Unhealthy amounts of weight loss results in absence of menstrual cycles in women. Hair fuzz develops to insulate the body due to lack of normal necessary body fat. Both anorexics and bulimics demonstrate extreme concern with body weight and shape.

Bulimia nervosa is characterized by secretive cycles of binge eating followed by purging. Binging is consuming excessive amounts of food in short amounts of time. Purging is getting rid of food before digestion through methods such as self-induced vomiting, laxatives, or excessive exercise. Feeling out of control during a binge and eating beyond the

By Vicki Isacowitz



## ON THE CHALKBOARD

point of fullness results in frequent purging. Bulimics feel they can control their ability to gain or lose weight by ridding themselves of food immediately after its consumption.

Binge Eating Disorder, also known as compulsive overeating, consists of uncontrolled impulsive or continuous eating beyond the sensation of fullness. Purging does not usually happen. Feelings of shame or self-hatred are common after a binge. Struggling with anxiety, depression, and loneliness lead to destructive episodes of binge eating. Body weight may vary from normal to mild, moderate or severe obesity.

Several factors contribute to eating disorders: psychological, interpersonal, and social.

Psychological factors include low self-esteem associated with depression, anxiety, anger or loneliness. Feelings of inadequacy or lack of control in life is influential in the desire to control food. Interpersonal factors involve problems in personal and family relationships, along with difficulty expressing emotions. History of physical or sexual abuse, or past experiences of teasing or mocking based on size and weight are other contributions to food and body issues.

Social factors surrounding cultural pressures that promote "thinness" and value placement on having the "perfect body" induce the behaviors of eating disorders. Researchers are investigating biochemical and biological causes. Some scientists believe eating disorders occur from an imbalance in brain chemicals responsible for controlling hunger, appetite, and digestion.

According to the National Eating Disorders Association, complicated conditions stem from a variety of potential causes. A self-perpetuating cycle of emotional and physical destruction happens once eating disorders take over. Professional help is required and available in treating these serious and potentially life threatening illnesses. The good news is that recovery is possible.

Once an eating disorder is recognized, the first step toward healing is finding appropriate treatment. A combination of psychological and nutritional counseling can lead sufferers towards maintaining healthy eating habits and lifestyles. Depending on the severity and progression of the illness, both outpatient and inpatient services are available.

For more information, visit [www.nationaleatingdisorders.org](http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org) or contact your primary care physician.

— Vicki Isacowitz is a secondary English teacher who has been educating students since 1996. She is co-founder of Clever Minds Educational Services, providing tutoring for students in grades K-12. Call 582-1707 or e-mail [vicki@cleverminds.org](mailto:vicki@cleverminds.org).