

WHAT ARE EATING DISORDERS?

Eating disorders are very complex conditions. The underlying causes seem to be psychological and emotional, although physiological factors may make some individuals more vulnerable to the development of anorexia and bulimia than others.

The central issue underlying an eating disorder is not food, although the person may spend a tremendous amount of time worrying about, discussing, and arguing about food and body weight with family and friends. Instead, eating disorders are more directly related to an intense desire to excel, and most of all, to be in control and have power over something. Related issues include overachievement, poor self-esteem, and lack of independent and goal directed behavior. The food behavior is merely the method by which the individual hopes to gain these goals.

While most of the attention recently has focused on anorexia nervosa and bulimia, eating disorders are not limited to only these conditions. Compulsive overeating and fast food and junk food overconsumption are also examples of eating disorders.

COMPULSIVE OVEREATING

Compulsive overeating is the consumption of excessive amounts of food, resulting in a weight gain of approximately 20% or more above one's "ideal" weight. (It should be noted that "ideal" weight differs with body type, frame size, and age.) Some people may eat compulsively but not gain weight through rigorous exercise or restriction of other foods.

ANOREXIA NERVOSA

Anorexia nervosa is characterized by behavior directed towards losing weight by restricting food intake to the point of becoming dangerously emaciated. This condition has been called "voluntary self-starvation".

BULIMIA (BULIMAREXIA)

Bulimia is the binge-purge syndrome where a large number of calories are consumed and then purged through vomiting, laxative use, fasting or some other means of purgation.



SIGNS and SYMPTOMS

ANOREXIA NERVOSA

- A weight loss of 20-25% of normal body weight
- Amenorrhea (cessation of menstrual period) is often a problem
- Dry skin, may be covered with downy fuzz
- Head hair may be thin and limp
- Nails become very brittle and grow very slowly
- Entire metabolism slows down. Blood pressure, pulse and body temperature are lower than normal. Hands, feet and other parts of the body always cold.
- Predisposition to excessive exercise
- Strange, bizarre eating habits and food rituals
- Loss of perspective on appearance. Thinks "I'm too fat" even when emaciated.

BULIMIA

- Secretive binge eating that can occur regularly and follow a pattern
- Binges are followed by fasting, laxative abuse, self-induced vomiting or other forms of purgation. Person may chew food but spit it out before swallowing.
- Swollen glands in neck below jaw
- Dental cavities and loss of tooth enamel
- Broken blood vessels in face. Bags under eyes.
- Fainting spells. Rapid or irregular heartbeat. Tremors and blurred vision follow episodes of vomiting.
- Miscellaneous stomach and intestinal discomfort and problems
- Fluctuating weight due to alternating periods of bingeing and fasting

At first bulimia may seem an easy way out, but it can quickly develop into a vicious cycle, which has devastating physical and psychological effects. There are several places in the Eugene area that specialize in treating bulimia and other eating disorders. If you find yourself in this situation, please get help before irreparable damage is done.

Written with help from Kristin Dunkleberg and Jill Winklesky, Peer Health Advisors