

Mental Health Carers Service Information & Advice Sheets

Eating Disorders

Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa are the two main eating disorders. People with anorexia nervosa can have extreme weight loss as a result of strict dieting. Some people may also make themselves sick, abuse laxatives or do excessive exercise to try and control their weight. In spite of their low weight, people with anorexia nervosa believe that they are fat. It starts most commonly in the mid-teens. About one in one hundred 16-18 year olds have the illness and it is commonly found in girls.

People with bulimia nervosa crave food and eat in binges, afterwards making themselves sick or misusing laxatives to get the food out of their bodies. Unlike anorexia nervosa, the distress experienced by those suffering from bulimia may go unnoticed. The person may be any weight or size and not look ill. They may appear to be in control of their external lives, coping fairly successfully on a day-to-day basis, but they are likely to be tormented by an unpredictable cycle of chaotic eating, ranging from periods of starvation to eating thousands of calories.

Bulimia nervosa is usually more common in girls and is more common than anorexia nervosa although people who have this condition do not always ask for treatment.

Treatment

In both anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa, self-help strategies can be very helpful. Eating problems can be very isolating. Support and self-help groups provide an opportunity to meet regularly with others who have had similar experiences.

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If self-help is not enough, health professionals may suggest a course of psychotherapy to help the individual and the family to understand why the illness developed and how to overcome it. The aim will be to help the person change their attitude, behaviour and ways of thinking to enable them to cope with the strains of life without the eating disorder as a protection. However, if someone has lost a dangerous amount of weight, the first step will be to help the person start to regain weight in order to survive and this may involve being admitted to hospital in order to support the individual.