



Eating disorders

Some studies find
as many as

1 in 4
teenage girls

show signs of an
eating disorder.
And it isn't just girls.
Around

10%
of people

receiving treatment
are boys
and experts believe
thousands more
suffer in silence.

What are eating disorders?

An eating disorder develops when someone struggling with other things begins to try to control their eating, believing this will make everything better. They often aim to eat very restricted diets, or to lose a lot of weight.

Some are successful in keeping up this control, but as their emotional state does not change, they carry on losing weight in the hope things will improve. These people are at risk of **anorexia nervosa**. They can become convinced they're still overweight even when dangerously thin.

Others find their control breaks down and they experience **binges** - where they feel a sense of losing control and overeat foods they would normally forbid themselves, sometimes in large quantities. Some gain weight rapidly and often end up obese: this is known as **binge eating disorder**.

Those who take action to avoid putting on weight due to their binges often make themselves sick or take laxatives. This is called **purging**. This pattern of restricting, then bingeing and purging becomes the vicious cycle that defines **bulimia nervosa** and can go on for years.

Eating disorders affect people of all ages, both male and female, and can develop quickly, or over a number of years. They can be very serious and cause great distress.

What causes eating disorders?

Eating disorders are an attempt to cope with emotional pain and distress. They are complex illnesses and have a variety of causes. Eating disorders often accompany other mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety and self-harm.

Can they be treated?

Yes! Recovery from eating disorders is possible, but it's a gradual process and takes time. Treatment is generally outpatient, although very physically unwell patients (especially those with anorexia nervosa, or those under 18) may be offered inpatient care. It's almost always done with the agreement of the person suffering, but in very severe cases where their life is at risk, treatment may be done after someone is sectioned, or with parental consent.

Eating disorders benefit from a **combination approach** of treatment. **Cognitive behavioural therapy** can be very effective, as can other **talking therapies**. Some specialist units offer a variety of approaches designed to



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“I felt like somehow if I could just be thinner, it would make everything better. But actually it made things much worse instead.”

help people feel more comfortable with themselves as well. Treatment for anorexia will also include some form of **re-feeding therapy**, designed to reverse the effects of malnutrition, which can cause the sufferer to be too unwell to focus on conventional treatment at first.

What about faith?

We live in a society obsessed with appearance, where perfection is worshipped and what you look like determines what you're worth. The Bible tells us just how wrong that is. We are 'fearfully and wonderfully made' (Psalm 139:14), much loved children of God not because of anything we have done, or are, but through our faith (Galatians 3:26). Whatever life has thrown at us, we know that God sees us as 'children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation' (Philippians 2:15). It's easy to get caught up in the pressure surrounding what we look like; we must remember that God 'does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart' (1 Samuel 16:7).

Those struggling with eating disorders are often putting other people first and trying to do their best in everything. But they need to get treatment for an eating disorder, even if it means stepping back from other things for a while. An eating disorder is an example of how sometimes the enemy tries to 'steal and destroy' our lives - but Jesus said he came so that people could experience 'life to the full' (John 10:10). God does not want people to spend their lives limited and chained by an eating disorder.

⇒ Helpful links

If you're struggling with an eating disorder, or supporting someone else, Anorexia & Bulimia Care is a national Christian charity that can offer support, advice and resources to help get started on the road to recovery:

⇒ www.anorexiabulimiacare.org.uk

For a book about eating disorders and how and why they develop: Eating Disorders: The Path to Recovery, by Dr Kate Middleton

⇒ <https://tinyurl.com/eating-disorders-book>

Lion also publish a great book for parents:

The Parent's Guide to Eating Disorders, by Jane Smith

⇒ <https://tinyurl.com/parents-guide-to-eating-dis>

'Why can't I eat normally?' is a seminar looking at the key eating disorders and some of the causes that can underlie them:

⇒ <https://tinyurl.com/why-i-cant-eat-normally-mp3>