EATING DISORDERS

Food is fuel for the body and needs to be consumed at a level which will maintain the body in good health and working order. Eating too much or too little can cause health problems and in extreme circumstances even death.

In an image conscious society thoughts and feelings often revolve around weight gain and loss. These thoughts can become all-encompassing with the result that everyday activities become difficult to manage.

What is an eating disorder?

There are eating patterns which derive from a person having a real fear of getting fat. These patterns may involve eating too little, eating too much and vomiting and using laxatives to get rid of calories.

Although eating disorders predominantly affect women and girls (often starting in adolescence) they also affect men and boys.

Eating disorders often co-exist with depression, anxiety and substance abuse. A University of Leicester survey on student psychological health found that there were indications of a strong link between eating disorders and low mood.

There is no definitive answer as to what causes eating disorders but the following have been suggested as possible factors:

Societal pressure - western society promotes ‘thinness’ and puts value on being slim

Control – saying no to food may be an individual’s only way to express feelings and exert an influence on others.

Growing up – The responsibilities and consequences of growing up can be frightening. Staying thin and avoiding the development of physical features may seem like an effective means of avoiding the demands of getting older, especially sexual demands.

Life events – People who experience eating disorders are very often high achievers, and may also have low self-esteem. When people are anxious, additional worry about things such as exams, course work deadlines etc can make them feel particularly vulnerable. Losing weight can be a way of trying to gain respect and self-worth.
The most common expressions of eating disorders are anorexia nervosa, bulimia and binge eating disorder (BED).

**Anorexia nervosa** – where a person does not eat enough because they think they are fat. For some people their fear and anxiety associated with weight gain may be so great they go through periods of total starvation. They may also attempt to burn off calorie intake through excessive exercise. With this disorder early intervention is vital, since this is a potentially life-threatening condition.

**Bulimia Nervosa** – A person has periods of overeating and purging (vomiting, use of laxatives). There may be long periods without eating and then a period of eating extreme amounts of food, followed by purging.

**Binge eating** – this is when eating is out of control. Large amounts of food are consumed but there is no purging.

### What may happen if you have an eating disorder?

People with eating disorders may experience the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical Symptoms</th>
<th>Psychological symptoms</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Severe weight loss/gain</td>
<td>• Lethargy</td>
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<tr>
<td>• High/low blood pressure</td>
<td>• Loss of libido</td>
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<td>• Liver damage</td>
<td>• Alcohol and substance abuse</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Heart, bowel and kidney damage</td>
<td>• Obsession about food and eating</td>
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<td>• Brittle bones, hair and nails</td>
<td>• Insomnia</td>
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<td>• Growth of ‘baby like’ hair</td>
<td>• Poor concentration and attention span</td>
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<td>• Cessation of periods</td>
<td>• Anxiety/depression/self-harm</td>
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<td>• Polycystic ovary syndrome</td>
<td>• Loss of interest in others</td>
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<td>• Electrolyte imbalances</td>
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<td>• Tooth decay</td>
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<td>• Swollen fingers</td>
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<td>• Seizures</td>
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<td>• Constipation</td>
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<td>• Shortened life expectancy</td>
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What can you do?
The first step is to recognise and accept you have an eating-related problem. The second step is to talk to someone.

Where can I get support?
Talking to someone may feel hard to do, so it is important you find someone whom you can trust and feel you can confide in. This may be a friend, fellow student or a member of the teaching staff. If you are concerned that they may worry about what you tell them or will not understand you could see someone not directly involved in your life.

Your GP can be a useful first point of contact. In some cases, your GP will refer you for more specialised help and support.

The University of Leicester Counselling and Wellbeing Service has a number of counsellors who help you understand and make sense of your feelings. This Service provides information and an opportunity for you to talk as little or as much as you like in a relaxed and confidential environment, with someone who will be non-judgemental. Counselling sessions usually last 50 minutes and the number of appointments will be decided by you and your counsellor.

You can arrange an appointment by contacting our receptionist by telephone on 0116 223 1780, fax 0116 223 1269, Email at counselling@le.ac.uk or by calling into reception at the Counselling and Wellbeing Service.

The following are organisations that can provide support.

Beating Eating Disorders (BEAT)
Adult Helpline: 0845 6341414
E: help@b-eat.co.uk
BEAT Youthline: 0845 634 7650 (up to 25 yrs)
text no: 07786 201820
E: fyp@b-eat.co.uk
Website: www.b-eat.co.uk

NHS Direct
24 hrs support T: 0845 4647 (number may change to 111 in future)
Suggested Reading

Cooper P & Fairburn C. Bulimia nervosa and binge eating: A guide to recovery. (Constable & Robinson)

Duker M & Slade R. Anorexia and Bulimia: How to Help (OU Press)

Fairburn C: Overcoming binge eating (Guildford Press)


Treasure J & Schmidt U. Getting better BITE by BITE. A survival guide for sufferers of bulimia, nervosa and binge eating disorder. (Hove Psychology Press)

Anorexia nervosa & related eating disorders (ANRED) self help tips
http://www.anred.com/slfhlphtml

Helping others with eating disorders

It can feel very worrying living or studying with a friend who you think might have an eating disorder.

It is important not to jump to conclusions, but try and discuss your concerns with them. You could also check out your concerns with other friends to see if they are also worried.

Individuals or groups of friends sometimes visit the Counselling and Wellbeing Service to discuss their concerns. Alternatively, you may find it useful to talk it through with a sub-warden who may have previous experience of such issues.

If your friend acknowledges they have a problem, encourage them to seek help and remember you don’t have to feel solely responsible for helping them to recover.

The Student Support Services (SSS) have a web page (accessed via CWIS and at www.le.ac.uk/ssds) for other student services that can provide information and assistance for a range of issues.

We would like to thank the University of Teeside for allowing us to adapt their student leaflets, on which this information on eating disorders was based.
Where to find Counselling and Wellbeing

Our entrance is at the rear of the building located directly on the junction of University Road and Welford Road. We have a ramp and there is a large sign on the wall. The building is accessible to wheelchair users.

Contact Details

Counselling and Wellbeing
University of Leicester
161 Welford Road
Leicester
LE2 6BF

T: 0116 223 1780
F: 0116 223 1269

www.le.ac.uk/counselling

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