



CANADIAN MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION
L'ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE POUR LA SANTÉ MENTALE
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Fact Sheet

EATING DISORDERS: ANOREXIA NERVOSA AND BULIMIA NERVOSA

Although this Fact Sheet was created with input from consumers of mental health services, psychologists and psychiatrists, the information is of a general nature. More comprehensive information can be obtained from libraries, including Ontario Division, and your local CMHA branch.

Eating disorders and weight preoccupation can be understood as coping strategies to deal with underlying emotions, stresses and experiences. If you have concerns about your eating behaviours, or are unable to accept your natural body shape and size, it is important to seek appropriate counselling from a knowledgeable person.

WHAT IS ANOREXIA NERVOSA?

Anorexia Nervosa is identified as drastic weight loss from dieting, which can lead to emaciation, compromised physical and psychological health, and sometimes death. Most individuals with anorexia don't recognize how underweight they are, which makes it difficult to convince them to seek treatment.

WHAT IS BULIMIA NERVOSA?

Bulimia is identified by constant changes in weight, with episodes of binge eating followed by self induced vomiting or purging by laxatives, and periods of fasting. People with bulimia may initially lose weight, but may gain all of it back because of the ineffectiveness of purging.

Anorexia and Bulimia can have serious medical and psychological complications:

- Noticeable weight loss (with distorted body image)
- Hyperactivity
- Loss of hair on head and/or growth of fine body hair
- Excessive constipation
- Menstrual irregularities
- Swollen glands
- Tooth loss/decay
- Severe dehydration
- Risk of heart irregularities

- Inconspicuous binge eating (feeling of shame and guilt)

WHAT CAUSES ANOREXIA OR BULIMIA?

The cause of these eating disorders is unknown. Many factors may act together to cause someone to develop an eating disorder. Women with eating disorders struggle with a fear of weight gain, excessive concern about body shape and calories (likely related to society's emphasis on dieting and fitness, and thinness being associated with beauty and popularity) feelings of worthlessness and low self esteem, depression, pressure to achieve for others and not for self, and early puberty.

HOW MANY PEOPLE ARE AFFECTED?

The most common age of the onset is between 14 and 25, and the ratio of women to men affected by eating disorders is nine to one. Studies indicate that approximately 1-2% of women in this age group have anorexia and 3-5% have bulimia.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Living with anorexia nervosa or bulimia can be a devastating experience. Denial of problems and thinking and feeling that "nothing is wrong" is often part of having an eating disorder. Persons may turn their attention to their weight and body shape because they have no control in some other aspect of their lives. The disorder can literally control the individual's life. It takes courage to admit you have an eating disorder and seek help, but eating disorders can be overcome.

WHAT ARE THE TREATMENTS?

Research has indicated that the earlier appropriate intervention occurs, the more likely the eating disorder will be successfully overcome. The best approach is a combination of medical treatment and psychotherapy, including counselling for the family. Finding a knowledgeable person you feel comfortable with and can trust is very important. Participation in a local support group may also help.

WHERE CAN I GO FOR HELP?

Remember you are not alone. Reaching out for help and knowing where to go for positive support can help a person recover from their negative state of crisis. You may want to contact your family physician, or your local branch of the Canadian Mental Health Association for information and referrals.