

Helping a young person with an eating disorder

*This pamphlet has been produced by
Clyst Vale Community College's
Counselling Service.*

This pamphlet is not intended to be a definitive guide, but does hope to provide support to families and young people.

We all have different eating patterns and few of us only eat when we are hungry. Eating patterns can be affected by many things in our lives. When food and eating becomes a problem this is seen as a sign of emotional distress and is worrying for families. This leaflet is designed to give some information about what to look out for and where to seek help if you are concerned that a young person you know is displaying signs of an eating disorder.

Food is important

We need food to survive but often our relationship with food is complex. Within the range of 'normal' eating are all manner of patterns – craving certain foods, eating little and often, eating one large meal a day, and so on. Sometimes people develop eating patterns which help them to cope with deep emotional and psychological pain. The withholding of food even when hungry, or eating large amounts when not hungry are ways someone can control a part of their lives when other things around them seem to be beyond their control.

The preoccupation with food and weight can be a way of deflecting attention away from other problems which they feel helpless to resolve. The subject of food and how much one weighs can be on someone's mind all the time and in this way becomes a sort of addiction, affecting life in a very negative way. Being 'addicted' to food presents huge problems because of course we need to eat to live, so if we have an eating problem we have no choice but to wrestle with this problem every day. Eating disorders need to be taken seriously and not dismissed as 'just a phase' a young person is going through. Many eating disorders can become life-threatening.

Anorexia Nervosa

A person suffering from anorexia will deny themselves food even while feeling very hungry and may view putting on weight as losing control. They may feel that their weight and what they eat is the only thing they have control over. Not eating and losing weight can become the person's way of feeling secure.

A young person with anorexia is likely to hold negative feelings about themselves and will almost certainly have a distorted self-image – they will see a fat person in the mirror even when they are dangerously underweight. In extreme cases a person can require hospitalization and can be sectioned under the mental health act.

Symptoms to look out for:

- Significant weight loss
- Avoiding high calorie foods
- Exercising excessively
- Making themselves sick
- A belief that they are overweight
- Being physically underdeveloped (girls may miss or not have started their periods)
- Hiding food or throwing it away
- Changes in personality, eg depression, tiredness, lack of concentration
- Wearing baggy clothing to cover up weight loss

Bulimia Nervosa

Bulimia consists of episodes of binge eating large amounts of high calorie foods in a short space of time followed by self-induced purging, either by vomiting or by using large quantities of laxatives to rid the body of the food.

A young person with bulimia will not necessarily be underweight but they have a morbid fear of becoming fat. Many of the symptoms are similar to anorexia such as exercising excessively, fear of becoming fat, depression.

Other symptoms include:

- Secret eating
- Frequent trips to the bathroom, especially after a meal
- Being agitated if unable to be alone after eating
- Constipation
- Puffiness in the face, red eyes and runny nose
- Bad teeth as stomach acid erodes tooth enamel
- Bad breath

Frequent vomiting can cause epileptic fits, muscular weakness and heart problems, while taking a lot of laxatives can also cause permanent damage.

Compulsive Eating

Someone who eats compulsively has come to rely on food for emotional support. They may feel they can't stop themselves from picking at food all day; as a consequence they are likely to be heavily overweight. Compulsive eating is a way of masking problems, often connected with close relationships. Underneath it often lies a sense of worthlessness, loneliness and loss.

Binge Eating

As with bulimia, people eat very large quantities of food all in one go. The binges may be triggered by a serious upset and may take place in secret. The person may feel quite out of control and will inevitably put on a lot of weight.

What causes eating problems?

There is never one single cause for an eating disorder so we should not make an assumption about the trigger. Often, the beginning is linked to a stressful event or trauma such as abuse, bereavement, family problems, exam pressures or bullying. It often coincides with life changes such as puberty, changing schools, confusion about sexuality, or leaving home. Ongoing physical or mental health problems can also provoke eating distress. Poor self-esteem and the inability to express strong and sustained emotions may also play a part.

How to help

Try to listen to the young person without making any assumptions about what might be causing their problem with eating. You may find they don't want to talk about their feelings or even recognise that there is a problem – make it clear that you still care for them and will be there if they want to talk to you another time. Encourage them to seek help; visiting the GP is the first step, offer to accompany them if they are worried about doing this. Consider ways of boosting their self-esteem.

Talk to a counsellor

Talking to a counsellor or other professional can help people to release painful feelings in a way that's constructive. Sometimes family therapy may be suggested and this can be invaluable in providing insight into the problem as well as supporting the family as a whole.

Internet support

There are several good organisations and websites that offer parents and young people support such as:

www.b-eat.co.uk
www.direct.gov.uk/YoungPeople
www.ChildLine.org.uk/EatingDisorder
www.rcpsych.ac.uk
www.mind.org.uk
www.eating-disorders.org.uk