What is an Eating Disorder?

Food is essential for our health and development. It’s not unusual to experiment with different eating habits; you may have decided to become a vegetarian or changed your diet to improve your health. However, some eating patterns can be damaging.

Problems with food can begin when it’s used to cope with those times when you are bored, anxious, angry, lonely, ashamed or sad. Food becomes a problem when it is used to help you to cope with painful situations or feelings, or to relieve stress, perhaps without you even realising it.

It is unlikely that an eating disorder will result from a single cause. It is much more likely to be a combination of many factors:

- events (the death of someone special, sexual or emotional abuse)
- feelings (low self-esteem, lack of confidence, feeling too fat or not good enough)
- pressures (relationships, problems with friends, problems at work, college or university)

Often people with eating disorders say that the eating disorder is the only way they feel they can stay in control of their life, but as time goes on it is not them who’s in control – it is the eating disorder.

There are different types of eating disorders;

**Anorexia Nervosa**

Anorexia is a disorder that stems from low self-esteem and an inability to cope safely with worries and problems. It involves lowering your food intake by skipping meals and cutting down the type and amount of food you eat; some also people over-exercise. You may believe that if you lose weight your life would be happier, people will like you more, you will be more successful or even perhaps that you may be noticed less. You may try to find ways of punishing yourself if you don’t lose enough weight or eat something you would not usually eat.

**Bulimia Nervosa Facts**

Bulimia is also a disorder linked with self-esteem, emotional problems and stress. You may constantly think about calories, dieting and ways of getting rid of the food you have eaten. Bulimia is actually more common than anorexia, but is more of a
hidden illness, because people with bulimia usually remain an average or just over average body weight. Bulimia can go unnoticed for a long time, although you may feel ill and very unhappy.

If you have bulimia you become involved in a cycle of eating a very large amount of food, making yourself sick, cutting down or starving for a few days or trying to find other ways to make up for the food you have eaten. Starving causes you to become so hungry that you eat large amounts of food because your body is craving nourishment. Some people will not vomit but will take laxatives: both behaviours may be described as ‘purging’ by medical professionals but taking laxatives is particularly dangerous.

Just because bulimia does not always cause the extreme weight loss that anorexia does, it does not mean that it is less serious.

Binge-eating disorder and Compulsive Overeating

If you binge eat, you may eat large amounts of food in a short period of time (perhaps not at a normal mealtime) and feel a lack of control during these binges, but unlike someone with bulimia nervosa, you do not try to get rid of the food. You may feel your eating is out of control, eat what you think of as an unusually large amount of food, eat much more quickly in these binges, eat until you are uncomfortably full, eat large amounts of food when you are not hungry or eat alone. You do this for very similar reasons to someone with bulimia.

Compulsive overeating involves ‘picking’ at food all day. There may be different reasons why you do this, but as with eating disorders, food and eating is used as a way of dealing with difficult feelings. If you compulsively overeat or binge eat, you may feel depressed or inadequate because you cannot control your eating, which can lead to further eating and weight gain.

Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (EDNOS).

Eating disorders are very complex which means there can be variations in the typical signs and symptoms and not all of the signs and symptoms will apply to all people. There are many people diagnosed with Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (EDNOS). These are disorders where you have some but not all of the diagnostic signs for anorexia or bulimia.

Click here to view further guidance on Eating Disorders