



Normal Healthy Eating and Eating Disorders

CONTENTS

- What is normal healthy eating?
- Do you like your body?
- What can you do?
- Signs and symptoms of an eating disorder
- What causes eating disorders?
- How to help a relative or friend with an eating disorder
- Help! Where can I find it?

WHAT IS NORMAL HEALTHY EATING?

Normal healthy eating is not only about what we eat, but also how we eat, why we eat and the attitudes that we have towards food and eating. There is no right way to eat normally, it differs for everyone and depends on a person's physical, cultural, lifestyle and emotional needs. Some general guidelines however, apply to everyone.

Normal healthy eating is:

- being flexible in what and when you eat;
- eating regularly throughout the day in response to physical hunger;
- eating the quantity of food that satisfies you;
- giving yourself permission to eat foods you enjoy;
- balancing nutrition and enjoyment through consumption of a variety of foods;
- acknowledging food as an important part of your social life; and
- accepting some amount of emotional eating as normal.

For some, normal healthy eating is not easy, particularly if you have become dissatisfied with your body weight, shape or appearance.

DO YOU LIKE YOUR BODY?

Many people (especially women) don't. This is understandable given that we are bombarded with images in advertising and the media of the 'ideal' body. Sometimes it is easy to forget that we are all different and have a unique shape and size.

Because the pressure to be slim is so great, it may cause us to:

- become preoccupied with what we don't like about our bodies and ignore positive qualities;
- constantly diet in an attempt to mould our bodies into the 'ideal' shape; or
- feel guilty and anxious about food.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Do nice things for yourself regularly.
- Enjoy being in your body – do things you like such as dancing, walking, relaxing, or taking a bath.
- Start doing things you have been putting off until you are thinner.
- Wear clothes you enjoy and feel comfortable in.
- Challenge common stereotypes about being fat and thin in your daily life.
- Get support from people who accept you as you are.
- Avoid restrictive dieting – dieting can set up negative feelings towards food.

Unfortunately, some people become so unhappy or dissatisfied with their body weight and/or shape that they make dramatic changes to their eating behaviour

and, in severe cases, develop an eating disorder.

The main eating disorders are Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF AN EATING DISORDER

Physical

- excessive weight loss
- loss of menstrual period in females
- sensitivity to cold
- difficulty concentrating
- feeling tired, dizzy or faint

Emotional

- intense fear of gaining weight or being fat
- distorted perception of body size and weight
- expressing guilt, shame or disgust about eating
- irritable, moody, depressed, sad, angry, tearful

Behavioural

- unusual eating habits and/or pre-occupation with food
- extreme physical activity or following strict exercise routines
- becoming socially isolated
- use of laxatives, diuretics, self-induced vomiting

WHAT CAUSES EATING DISORDERS?

Many factors are thought to affect the development of eating disorders:

- biological factors such as physical changes associated with adolescence;
- social factors including pressure to achieve and succeed;
- psychological factors such as major life changes; and
- personality characteristics including perfectionism and low self-esteem.

Often eating disorders are the result of a combination of these factors.

HOW TO HELP A RELATIVE OR FRIEND WITH AN EATING DISORDER

If you are concerned that a relative or friend might be suffering from an eating disorder, the following points may help:

Don't

- let these issues dominate your relationship with the person;
- force the person to eat;
- try to control their behaviour as it can intensify the problem;
- take on the role of therapist – do only what you feel capable and comfortable with; or
- blame the person – try to understand the eating disorder as a coping strategy for dealing with painful emotions and experiences.

Do

- inform yourself of the disorders and their treatments and help others to understand the disorder;
- examine your feelings and thoughts about eating disorders;
- support the person to make their own discoveries and learn about themselves;
- remember that the recovery process is slow; and
- encourage the person to seek professional care.

Whatever the causes and symptoms of an eating disorder, help is available.

HELP! WHERE CAN I FIND IT?

- Self-help information is available on the Student Services website – follow the links to the Counselling Service.
- Peruse/borrow books from the Student Services counselling resource library.
- Seek counselling through the Counselling Service to discuss your concerns about body weight, shape or appearance and address unproductive thoughts about food and eating.
- Contact the Community Nutrition Unit, telephone (03) 6222 7222.
- If your issues with food and body weight are severe and/or prolonged, consult your general medical practitioner.