

Bulimia

People who have bulimia go through a ritual where they eat lots of food in a short amount of time, this is called 'bingeing'. Some individuals also use laxatives because they think they can empty the food out before it is absorbed into their bodies. They believe this will help them to lose weight. They will also carry out excessive exercise to try to prevent gaining weight. This is known as 'purging'. Bulimia is often a vicious cycle of bingeing and purging when life becomes too stressful to cope. These destructive feelings can be removed by the action of eating. Once the food is inside their stomachs it turns 'bad' and negative feelings such as shame come to the fore. The individual then feels they have got to get rid of these bad feelings down the toilet. Once this is done, bulimics feel relieved, and face the world again until the next purging episode.

Bulimia is a serious mental health problem with many physical issues such as tiredness and weakness caused by not getting the right nutrients, tooth enamel damage from persistent vomiting, damage to the vocal chords and throat, absent or irregular periods, swollen glands, fits and muscle spasms, kidney damage, permanent constipation, osteoporosis, and a risk of cardiac arrest due to a decrease in potassium which creates an electrolyte imbalance. Other signs of bulimia are:

- Exercising a lot more than usual.
- Going to the toilet after meals.
- Isolating from others.
- Dry skin and brittle fingernails.
- Scars on fingers, knuckles, or backs of hands.
- Bad breath.
- Constant eating which becomes uncontrollable once the eating has started.
- Lack of sexual interest.

Psychologically one can understand bulimia as being in touch with an individual's feelings and the need for relationships with significant others. However, these feelings are experienced to the degree that they are overwhelming and feel destructive. Therefore, the bulimia is used to control these intense emotions.

Guide for Caregivers

Encourage your son or daughter to engage in activities and do something enjoyable with friends. Try and persuade them to have mindful eating behaviours such as focusing on the food that they like and cooking healthy meals. Make sure they are surrounded by loved ones during mealtimes. Encourage them to practice relaxation techniques to develop a natural response when stress levels are increased. Getting professional support as soon as possible gives your young person the best chance of recovering from anorexia. The diagnosis of bulimia is so complex, consisting of psychological, biological, and environmental factors. Once referred, their GP will ask questions about the young person's eating habits, how they are feeling, and will check their overall health and weight. They may also refer them for some blood tests to make sure their weight loss is not caused by something else. If a GP believes a young person is bulimic, they will refer them to an eating disorder specialist. These are highly trained professionals who are equipped to help individuals establish self-soothing techniques, meal plans, and personalized coping mechanisms. In time, individuals can build the resilience needed to fully recover from their eating disorder. Caregivers can talk in confidence to an adviser from Beat, the UK's leading charity supporting those affected by eating disorders (www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk). You can reach them in person by calling its adult helpline on 0808 801 0677 or youth helpline on 0808 801 0711. 0300 123 3355 | beateatingdisorders.org.uk info@beateatingdisorders.org.uk

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