

## WHAT TO DO IF YOU THINK YOU HAVE AN EATING DISORDER

Many people have problems with their eating. If you do have an eating disorder, it is something you have the right to get help with. Remember that the disorders can be overcome. Getting professional help (link to treatment) and support from others is important. Recovery may be slow while you learn to approach food in a more positive way, and understand the reasons for your behaviour, but the effort will be well worthwhile.

### Do I have an eating problem?

One of the hardest steps to take when you have an eating disorder is to admit it to yourself. Generally speaking if thoughts about food are consuming a lot of your time, or you are unhappy around food and eating issues, then it is enough of an issue to do something about.

Eating disorders are not uncommon in our community. Many people live with these disorders for long periods of time without treatment or a clinical diagnosis. Although the onset of an eating disorder is usually during adolescence, the reality is that these disorders affect all age groups, both genders and people from a range of backgrounds and different cultures.

Eating disorders vary in their severity. Although not all people may fall into a clinical definition of an eating disorder, people may still have problems with their eating and thought patterns, which cause them physical and psychological damage. Similarly, people may develop problems with their eating patterns that may later develop into an eating disorder.

### Dieting

Many dieting behaviours can be damaging to physical and psychological health. Fluctuating weight is common for most people who diet frequently, as most people re-gain all the weight they have lost after a diet. Weight loss or weight gain may lead to long-term physical side effects. As well as the physical effects, dieting can be damaging to people's emotional and psychological health, for example, people who diet frequently are more likely to experience depression.

Apart from the associated risks of restricting certain foods in our diet, dieting can lead to eating disorders. Recent research shows that

women who diet severely, are eighteen times more likely to develop an eating disorder. Women who diet moderately are five times more likely to develop an eating disorder. Although past dieting is common among people with eating disorders, there are many reasons a person may choose to diet in the first place.

### Possible Signs of an eating problem

Symptoms of eating problems vary from person to person. However if you have experienced some of the following behavioural or physical signs, it may be an indication that you have a problem with your eating.

- dieting
- overeating
- feeling out of control with food
- fear of becoming overweight
- developing a list of 'good' and 'bad' foods
- weight loss or fluctuating weight
- preoccupation with body appearance or weight
- loss or disturbance of menstrual periods (females)
- sensitivity to the cold
- faintness, dizziness, fatigue
- sleep disturbances
- increased mood changes, irritability
- social withdrawal
- anxiety, depression
- increased interest in preparing food for others
- obsessive rituals, ie: only drinking out of a certain cup
- wearing baggy clothes/change in clothing style
- excessive or fluctuating exercise patterns
- avoidance of social situations involving food
- making frequent excuses not to eat

Everyone, at some point in their life has issues with eating or body image, but not everyone develops an eating disorder. Sometimes the development of an eating disorder has been gradual and people may not even realise they have a problem.

## Seeking Professional Help

Individuals who attempt to tackle their eating disorder by themselves often fail as it is extremely difficult to overcome an eating disorder without some form of professional assistance.

There are numerous approaches used in treating an eating disorder. Treatments include psychotherapy, family therapy, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, drug therapy, hypnosis etc. No one treatment works for everyone and sometimes individuals might need to try several types of treatment, or a combination of treatments, before finding the right approach for them.

A skilled therapist can play an important role in the recovery process. There needs to be a feeling of trust in any therapeutic relationship if it is going to be beneficial. You might need to be prepared to talk to a few therapists before you find one that you feel you can work with. One of the best ways to gain a sense of this is to ask questions such as:

- How did you become involved in the treatment of eating disorders?
- What is your training background?
- Can you describe your therapeutic approach? What will therapy involve?
- How often should we meet? For what length of time? How long do sessions run for?
- How much time will be focussed on food, weight and diet issues?
- Will you monitor my weight?
- Will you involve my family?

## Telling Someone

Once you have admitted to yourself that you have an eating disorder, you are faced with another step; to seek support. Telling someone can be very difficult especially for the first time. You may feel embarrassed, guilty or ashamed. Possibly, you may also feel afraid of the person's reaction.

Although we can never predict someone else's behaviour, we can spend hours wondering how they may react when we tell them. Often we think of a negative scenario, to prepare ourselves for the worst. However, the only way we are ever going to know how someone will react is if we take the risk to tell them. It can be useful to remind yourself of the benefits of telling someone, such as getting support and not having to hide a secret anymore.

It may be useful to consider who you would like to tell. It may be a friend, a family doctor, a family member, or a partner. People will have varying reactions; some may be surprised, uncomfortable, confused, or worried. Others may

be angry, scared and unsure of what to say. Some may have seen the signs and are glad you have told them.

Remind yourself that they may need a few days to deal with their own feelings and reactions. If you have a negative experience telling someone, it is important that you don't let this stop you from getting the professional help and support you deserve. Consider who else you may tell such as a friend, family member or professional. Below are some suggestions that may be useful when you tell someone.

- Give the person some information, or some phone numbers of relevant organisations. The EDFV is happy to send you brochures and reading lists that you may pass on to family and friends.
- Phone an anonymous or confidential service, such as the EDFV support and information line, or Lifeline. This can be useful to practice the words you may use, and also to see how it feels to admit it to someone else.
- If you are concerned about telling someone such as your family, you may like to have a friend or someone else with you.
- Prepare yourself for their emotional reaction.
- Remind yourself that you are only responsible for your own thoughts, feelings and actions, not other people's. You are not responsible for their pain, anger or guilt etc.
- Plan how you would like to respond if the person gets angry, or does not accept what you are saying. What would you like to say to them? What would you like to do?
- Consider the time and place that you will tell someone. When they are stressed or preoccupied may not be the best time to tell them.
- Remind yourself that you have taken a huge step in telling someone, regardless of their reaction.
- Write down what you would like to say, or give someone a letter.
- Remind yourself of the importance of telling people. This process is often a valuable way to find out who will be our support network through the illness.

## Website information

Living with someone with eating disorder  
Management of Eating disorders  
Why diets don't work  
Stories of recovery  
Health practitioners, Victoria