



# Eating Disorders - Information for Families

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The term "Eating Disorder" is used to describe several illnesses, all of which are characterized by unhealthy behaviors around food. These illnesses also generally involve distorted body image and awareness. The two primary eating disorders are Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa. Compulsive Overeating is also sometimes considered an eating disorder. A brief description of each is included below. For some general thoughts on dealing with a loved one's diagnosis of a mental illness such as an eating disorder, please see our ["Mental Illness - Information for Families"](#) page. Both Anorexia and Bulimia are much more common in females than in males. The number of persons with these disorders has increased dramatically in recent years, correlating with current media fascination with thinness. The trend toward thinner and thinner fashion models seems to strongly support this notion. Both illnesses also seem to be more prevalent in "high achievement" families, in which outstanding performance is pushed. Control issues also seem to be a key feature of the both the anorexic and bulimic disorder.

## **Anorexia Nervosa**

Anorexia, or Anorexia Nervosa, is an extreme and sometimes life-threatening condition, the primary features of which are preoccupation with weight and distorted body image (generally believing that one is grossly overweight at a bodyweight that appears to outsiders to be extremely underweight or even emaciated). Persons with anorexia refuse to maintain what others would consider a minimally normal body weight, and tend to take drastic measures in order to lose weight, including dieting, fasting or starving themselves, and compulsive exercise. They may seem extremely health conscious, but take their health-consciousness "too far". Some persons with anorexia may also exhibit the binge/purge cycles of bulimia (see below). It is not unusual for a person with anorexia to diet or starve themselves to the point where they require hospitalization. Sometimes even this is not sufficient; many anorexics (a notable example was the famous singer Karen Carpenter) actually starve themselves to death. Even at the point of hospitalization, the anorexic may genuinely believe that they are still overweight and that there is no reason to hospitalize them.

## **Bulimia Nervosa**

Bulimia, or Bulimia Nervosa, is an eating disorder characterized by cycles of bingeing and purging. The person with bulimia may maintain generally ordinary eating habits much of the time. However, they will occasionally (or frequently) "binge", eating large quantities of food, then "purge" by vomiting, using laxatives, or with extreme physical exercise. This pattern is typically done secretly, so that the family of the person with bulimia is not aware of the existence

of the disorder. Although a person with Anorexia may also exhibit binge/purge cycles, a person with Bulimia is generally able to maintain body weight at or above a minimally normal level.

### **Treatment of Eating Disorders**

Eating disorders are serious, and can be life threatening illnesses. Proper attention and therapy are important tools for recovery. Just "trying to get the sick person to eat more" is seldom a sufficient intervention, and is likely to backfire in many instances. Inpatient treatment may be necessary for severe cases. The process of recovery can be slow, as many core issues around self-esteem, self-worth, and self- image must be confronted. Family issues may also be deeply connected to eating disorders, and family therapy may be an important aspect of treatment. Medication may be appropriate, and a consultation with a psychiatrist helpful. Further medical intervention may be necessary if weight loss has progressed to a dangerous degree. It is important to remember the potential seriousness of these disorders, and to seek help if you believe that you or a family member is affected. **If your family member is out of control or suicidal (danger of harm to self or others), stay calm and call 911. Do not try to handle it alone.**

