



HEALTHIER MINDS 

Eating Problems and Eating Disorders

A Guide for Young People



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INTRODUCTION

This guide is written for young people who are affected by an eating disorder or eating problems. You may be worried about yourself or a friend. We hope this guide will help you understand what you, or your friend, may be going through and how you can ask for help. It also contains helpful links to further information and services that may be able to offer further support.

We recognised that there were more and more young people having problems with their eating. We have worked with young people, their families and professionals such as Social Workers, Educational Psychologists, School Nurses and a CAMHS Nurse Therapist to write this guidance to help you. We also have guidance for parents/carers as well as professionals so that you can get the best support possible.

What Young People Told Us

We asked young people who have been affected by an eating disorder what was important to them in their recovery. They told us that they would like time with a professional such as a Pastoral Support Teacher, Social Worker or School Nurse to talk about their concerns. They would also like to focus on other important areas of their life and need support to develop other interests which would distract them from their eating problems. Young people would also like professionals to talk to each other and share information with each other, once young people have given permission, as it can be hard for the young person to do this themselves. Young people also told us that they would prefer meetings to have fewer professionals present as this can be quite overwhelming for them.

WHAT ARE EATING PROBLEMS AND EATING DISORDERS?

Eating problems are described by the mental health charity ['Mind'](#) as 'any relationship with food that you find difficult'. Eating disorders is the term used for clinically diagnosed problems. A diagnosis is based on eating patterns and medically assessed weight, blood and body mass index.

Food plays an important part in our lives and our eating habits can change. Sometimes we may try to eat more healthily, at other times we may eat more than usual or lose our appetite. Changing our eating habits every now and again is normal. However it becomes problematic when someone starts to focus a lot on controlling what or how much they eat; when food and eating feels like it's taking over their life; or when they have worries and concerns which are having an impact on their eating behaviours. Eating disorders are serious mental illnesses affecting people of all ages, genders, ethnicities and backgrounds.

It's important to remember that eating disorders are not all about food itself, but about feelings. The way the person treats food may make them feel more able to cope, or may make them feel in control, though they might not be aware of the purpose this behaviour is serving. An eating disorder is never the fault of the person experiencing it, and anyone who has an eating disorder deserves fast, compassionate support to help them get better.

The [Beat Eating Disorders](#) website provides the following definitions for types of eating disorders:

- **Anorexia** or *anorexia nervosa* is a serious mental illness where people are of low weight due to limiting how much they eat and drink. They may develop "rules" around what they feel they can and cannot eat, as well as things like when and where they'll eat.
- **Avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder (ARFID)** is a condition characterised by the person avoiding certain foods or types of food, having restricted intake in terms of overall amount eaten, or both.
- **Binge eating disorder (BED)** is a serious mental illness where people eat very large quantities of food without feeling like they're in control of what they're doing.
- **Bulimia** or *bulimia nervosa* is characterised by a cycle of eating large quantities of food (called bingeing), and then trying to compensate for that overeating by vomiting, taking laxatives or diuretics, fasting, or exercising excessively (called purging).
- **Other specified feeding or eating disorder (OSFED):** Sometimes a person's eating behaviours don't exactly fit those expected for any of the above eating disorders. In that case, they might be diagnosed with an "**other specified feeding or eating disorder**" (OSFED).

EATING DISORDERS AND COVID 19

The Coronavirus pandemic and lockdown restrictions have had a significant impact on the mental health and wellbeing of many people, and young people have been particularly affected. Eating disorder organisations such as BEAT reported a big rise in young people seeking support and NHS services saw a rise in referrals for eating problems. For many, eating problems got worse or developed as young people struggled to cope with increasing anxiety, loss of control and less contact with friends. It's going to take a while to recover from the effects of Covid and it's more important than ever that we talk openly about mental health and make time for those activities which promote our emotional wellbeing.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF EATING PROBLEMS AND EATING DISORDERS?

You might be worried about your own eating behaviours or you might be worried about a friend. Some of the signs of eating problems are:

- skipping lunch all the time
- going to the bathroom regularly straight after a meal (to hide food or spit it out)
- avoiding or being self-conscious about eating with you or other friends
- covering up body parts
- talking more about weight, exercise or body image
- losing weight
- avoiding certain foods or eating only certain types of food
- eating much more than usual

I'M WORRIED ABOUT MY FRIEND!

Talk to Your Friend if you suspect they have an eating problem

As a friend, you might be one of the first to know if your friends are having eating difficulties or problems. It can be very difficult to raise the issue with a friend. You might worry you will say the wrong thing, offend, upset them or make things worse. However, talking about the issue is often the first step to recovery and in the long term, your friend will be grateful that you care and that you had the courage to discuss it.

Here are some things to think about before you talk to your friend:

When and where

- Speak to the person on your own or with one other person he or she trusts – you want to avoid the person feeling too much pressure (?)
- Find a quiet, comfortable and familiar place
- Avoid meal times when they might feel more anxious

Stay calm

- If your friend becomes angry or defensive, try to avoid getting angry yourself – an angry response is most likely an indication that you are right to be worried. Stay calm and reassure the person there is no pressure but you will be there when they are ready
- It is ok to approach them again at another time to gently remind them why you are worried and that help is available

What to say / what not to say

- Use a caring phrase like 'I've noticed' and talk about why you are worried
- Avoid focusing on food and weight
- Ask them how they feel and give them time to talk
- Listen respectfully

Conversation Starters

1. I've noticed that you don't want to eat with us. Is there something worrying you?
2. I've noticed you're not enjoying food like you used to. Is there anything you want to talk about?
3. I think that maybe I saw you hiding your food. Is something the matter?
4. I wonder if something is worrying you, I noticed you don't seem to be eating in public anymore.
5. It worries me that you always seem to disappear to the bathroom after you've eaten. Is there anything you'd like to tell me?
6. I've noticed that you're exercising more than usual. Is something on your mind?
7. I might not understand, but if you need someone to talk to, I will help as much as I can.
8. I've noticed you don't seem quite yourself recently. Is there anything on your mind?
9. I wonder if you would like to talk about how you are feeling?
10. I'm here for you when you're ready to talk.

Tell an Adult

People struggling with problem eating behaviours will often deny there is a problem so it's important to tell an adult if you still feel your friend is suffering alone.

Think carefully about which adult to tell

- A family member of your friend might be able to help
- A teacher that your friend gets on well with at school
- A guidance or pastoral support teacher

What to say

- Explain why you are worried about your friend
- Tell them a little about what you have tried with your friend already
- Ask the adult what they will do to help your friend

An adult cannot promise to keep secrets and it is likely they will want to talk to your friend and their parents but this is only so that your friend can get vital help.

I'M WORRIED ABOUT ME!

Talk to someone

- Speak to a parent/carer or a supportive adult at school.
- Go to the GP and ask a friend or family member to come with you if this would help

What to say

- Explain the way you've been feeling
- Tell someone what you are finding difficult and why you are worried
- Explain what help you would like and who could give it
- You could talk about some of the health problems or eating habits

Stay Calm

When you first talk to someone about your eating disorder they may become upset. Try not to get upset yourself as it shows that they care about you. Tell the person you will wait until they are calm and are feeling able to talk to you about it. Approach another friend or adult if you feel this would be better. Don't give up finding the help you need.

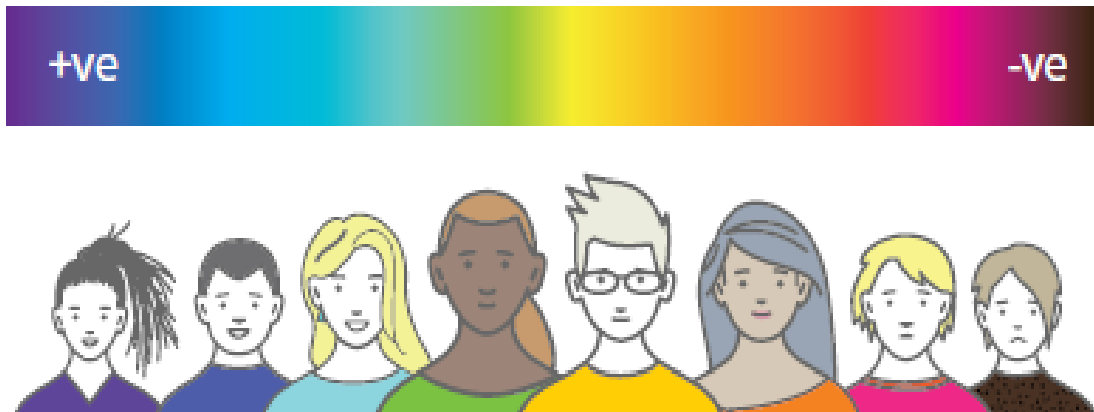
Some Practical Tips and Suggestions

- Keep doing enjoyable activities – remember that people have lots of other coping strategies that can distract them from the thoughts and behaviours associated with eating problems.
- Other coping strategies that you could try are relaxation, mindfulness techniques, listening to music or colouring. While exercise is a helpful strategy for most people, some people with eating problems will exercise too much.
- Remember that social media images aren't realistic and are often airbrushed.
- Go to the [Beat Eating Disorders Website](#) where there is more information and advice. There are other websites recommended at the end of this document.

MENTAL WELLBEING

It is normal to experience challenges as you grow up, particularly during your teenage years. It can be helpful to think of mental wellbeing as ranging from feeling happy and content to feeling very distressed, anxious, angry or sad. These strong emotions can be extremely difficult to manage. These difficulties are usually temporary and with support and coping strategies your mental wellbeing can improve. The support that you need during these times will differ depending on how you are feeling and the coping strategies you are using.

The Mental Wellbeing Continuum



In almost all situations, our mental wellbeing is best supported by those closest to us, particularly parents, family members, friends, and other key adults such as school staff. However, some people will require specialist help. When someone develops an eating problem or eating disorder it is an indication that they are struggling with their mental health. The challenges may not be directly related to food or body image but rather reflect strong feelings which the person is struggling to manage. Problematic eating behaviours can develop as a way to cope with these feelings during times of pressure, or to regain a sense of control if other areas of life feel out of control.

If not supported this can have much longer term impact on a person's mental and physical health. **Getting help early is really important for making the best recovery.**

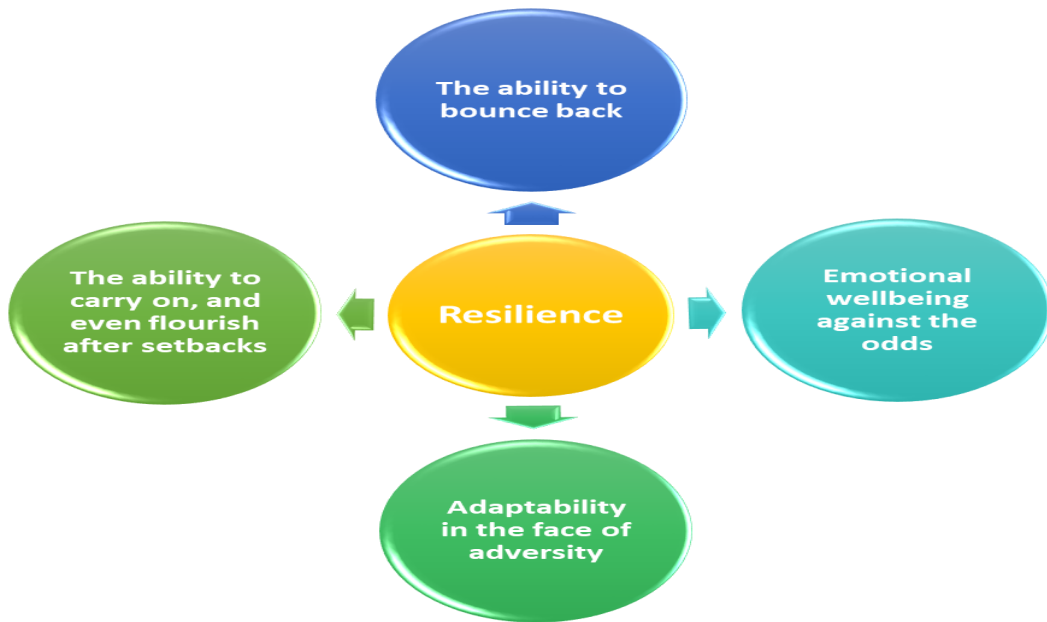
WHAT IS RESILIENCE?

Resilience is our ability to manage life's challenges, bounce back from adversity, and move forward. We all differ in our resilience. It is something that changes depending upon our situation and while we can be resilient in some areas of our life, we might struggle in others.

How we manage a difficult time will depend upon the support around us from friends and family and the coping strategies we have.

As we grow and develop we learn coping strategies that help us to manage difficult times in the future. These are behaviours that we learn through our relationships, interactions with others and our experiences of challenge. However, they are not always helpful or good for us. Problematic eating behaviours are an example of a coping strategy or attempt to feel in control during really difficult times.

Unfortunately, these eating behaviours can have long lasting consequences for a person's physical and mental health. In order to recover from an eating disorder it is important to learn and practice more helpful coping strategies.

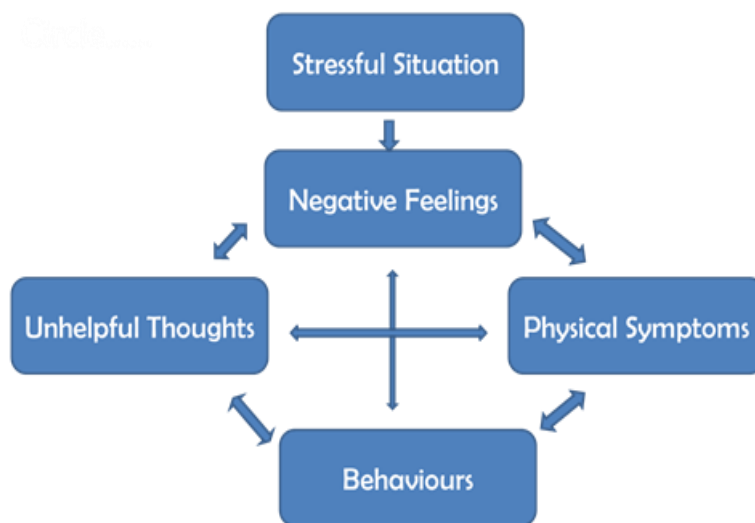


DEVELOPING HELPFUL COPING STRATEGIES

Changing Our Thoughts, Feelings and Behaviours

When we feel out of control, anxious or stressed we don't always think in a balanced way. We can focus on upsetting thoughts and feelings about ourselves, for example, 'they don't like me. I'm useless...' These thoughts can go around and around in our head and become more extreme, impacting how we feel and how we behave.

One of the main challenges for someone experiencing problematic eating is how they think about themselves, their day to day experiences and what other people think about them. They often feel out of control of certain areas of their life and the eating behaviour can become one way of retaining a sense of control.



One way to start to break this cycle is to pay more attention to our thoughts, feelings and behaviours and the connections between them.

Remember, although many of our thoughts occur outside our control, they are just thoughts, sometimes without any real basis, and are not necessarily facts. Even though we may believe a lot of our unhelpful thoughts when we are feeling stressed, it is good to remember that they should be questioned as they are often based on wrong assumptions. First you need to recognise an unhelpful thought, then you need to challenge it.

The following table gives some examples of types of thinking errors and unhelpful thoughts. Do you recognise any of these?

Thinking Error	Unhelpful Thoughts
Predicting the Future Catastrophising What if...	I know this party is going to be awful. What if I fail all my exams? My life is over. Eating that biscuit will make me fat.
Jumping to conclusions Taking things personally Mind reading	Why hasn't he text back? He must think I'm such an idiot! They're all looking at me and laughing.
Focusing on the negative Ignoring the Positive Filtering	I did ok in maths but then completely failed chemistry....what a disaster. Only 20 likes about my post, everyone hates me.
Black and white thinking All or nothing Perfectionism 'Should' thinking	That was a complete waste of time. They all hate me I'm such a loser. I should always get full marks. I should only eat when I am really hungry.
Over-generalising	A fail in English I'm completely useless. I had no friends at primary school so why should high school be any different?

The following questions will help you to challenge negative thoughts and to try and make them more balanced:

- Is this thought helpful to me?
- What is the evidence for and against this thought?
- What kind of 'thinking error' could it be?
- What would you say to a friend in the same situation if they were thinking this?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of thinking in this way?
- Is there another way of looking at the situation?
- How important is this thought? How will you feel about this in 6 weeks?
- What thought could I replace this with that would be more helpful?

Here are some examples of how you can adapt your thoughts to more helpful ones which will make you feel and behave in more helpful ways.

Unhelpful	Helpful
I've left it too late...it's useless.	I am going to make best use of the time I have left but I can still do this.
I'm never going to be able to get this done.	I'm going to do as much as I possibly can.
I can't cope with this.	I feel anxious, but that's ok I will take a deep breath and work through this.
I can't do this.	I'm going to give this a go but I might need to ask someone for help.
It's too hard.	This feels hard and scary but I can break it down and get through it.
Today was a disaster.	Some bits of today didn't go my way but I will think about the things that went well.
Everyone hates me.	I can't know what other people are thinking. I have great friends who I know like me and will support me.
Eating that biscuit will make me fat.	Eating one biscuit won't make me fat it's just my mind trying to trick me. I don't need to stop myself eating things to feel better.

The 'helpful' thoughts are more realistic and will make challenges easier to handle. Being able to change their unhelpful thoughts can therefore be a good coping strategy and help you feel less anxious.

Be Mindful

Practicing relaxing strategies or mindfulness techniques can be really helpful for reducing anxiety, they release hormones into your body which make you feel good and more able to think clearly.

Mindful Breathing

Find a comfortable sitting position, feet on the floor and spine straight. Close your eyes or focus your gaze on a spot slightly in front of you. Focus your attention on your breathing. When a thought pops into your head, notice it but allow it to pass by (you could imagine it passing by on a cloud or a floating leaf). Return your attention to your breathing, the sounds around you and the sensations in your body. Try to do this for 3-5 minutes.

Square Breathing

Imagine a square. Breathe in for the count of 4 imagining one side of the square, pause at the top corner before exhaling for the count of 4 to the next corner, pause, inhale for 4 to the bottom corner, pause and exhale for 4 to return to the starting point. Repeat.

For other relaxation, breathing and mindfulness activities see [Healthier Minds](https://blogs.glowscotland.org.uk/er/healthierminds/)
<https://blogs.glowscotland.org.uk/er/healthierminds/>

Self-care

Self-care is really important for improving emotional wellbeing and it will mean different things for different people. Here are some of the most popular self-care activities that young people told us about. What would you choose?

- Listening to music
- Spending time with friends
- Reading
- Colouring, drawing, being creative
- Cooking or baking
- Watching a favourite movie or TV series
- Going for a walk
- Talk to someone
- Is there something different you could try?

For other tips and information about looking after your wellbeing and to develop your helpful coping strategies see Healthier Minds
<https://blogs.glowscotland.org.uk/er/healthierminds/>

WHO CAN HELP?

G.P.

It is important to speak to a health professional as soon as possible if you have developed problematic eating behaviours. Your GP will be able to provide advice and refer you to specialist services if required.

School

If you have concerns about your own eating behaviours or if you are worried about a friend, you should talk to someone as soon as possible. If you don't want to talk to a family member immediately there might be someone at school you can discuss your concerns with.

The school can put a plan in place. Supports like these can be helpful for a young person experiencing eating problems:

- Wellbeing check-ins with a member of staff
- Time out card to allow breaks from class if necessary
- Adaptations to the timetable which take into account energy levels
- Reduced homework

The adult you speak to at school will encourage and help you to speak to a family member and/or your GP. It is really important that everyone works together to give you the best possible support.

Educational Psychology Service

Educational Psychologists work alongside school staff, young people, and parents and carers when there are concerns about a young person's wellbeing. If a young person's problematic eating is affecting how they are doing at school it is likely that an educational psychologist will become involved. Your pastoral support teacher can make a referral to the service and you and a family member will be invited to meet the educational psychologist along with your pastoral support teacher. You don't have to come along or you may prefer to talk to someone else you trust before the meeting so that they can give your views about how you are feeling and what would be helpful for you. Together, everyone, including you, will come up with a plan to help you. You will be able to tell the school, your family or the psychologist what is working and if anything needs to change.

You can get more information from the East Renfrewshire Educational Psychology Service website. <https://blogs.glowscotland.org.uk/er/PsychologicalService/>

East Renfrewshire School Nursing Team

East Renfrewshire has a School Nurse who helps with any health related concerns. The nurse may be able to help if you have concerns about your own, or a friend's eating behaviour. You may be invited to meet with the nurse and they will ask questions about your physical health and also how you are feeling. The school nurse may offer direct support to you or your friend or they may refer on to another service such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) or the Community Dietetics Team.

Healthier Minds service

This team supports the mental and emotional wellbeing of children and young people aged 10 to 18. The team includes people from different services, who have lots of experience and knowledge to ensure that you receive the support that best

meets your needs. Remember if you are feeling low and need some help speak to a trusted adult, either at home or through school. A self-referral can be made to the Healthier Minds Screening hub for support with problematic eating.

Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and Connect-ED (Specialist Eating Disorder Service)

Your GP might feel support from a specialist mental health service would be helpful. In this case your GP can refer to CAMHS. CAMHS is a NHS team that supports the mental health of children and young people. Due to the serious nature of eating problems and impact on physical and mental health CAMHS will often become involved.

You and a family member will be asked to attend an appointment for an initial meeting. You might meet a nurse, psychologist, occupational therapist, psychiatrist or family therapist. They will explain in detail the aim of the meeting and will ask you questions to help them understand your concerns and help to plan the next steps. They might need to take some blood but this will be explained to you in advance. You will have a care plan which details exactly what you need and who will be involved in your care.

The Connect-ed Team is a small, specialist team within CAMHS who work specifically with children, young people and their families who are affected by eating disorders. Someone from the team might work with you directly or they may support the other adults who support you.

CONCLUSION

We hope that you have found this guide useful in relation to eating disorders or problems. Hopefully you now have a better understanding of the different types of eating disorders and about how to spot signs that you or a friend may have a problem with eating. The guide also highlights the range of support that is available to you or your friend, including many links and additional sources of information and support for you to access.

WHERE CAN I FIND HELP ONLINE?

Beat Eating Disorders – The UK’s Eating Disorder Charity

Visit their website, find them on social media or call their helpline for online support groups, one to one chat and information about eating disorders and recovery.

<https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/>

@beatED

FB beat.eating.disorders

Helpline: 0808 801 0677 help@beateatingdisorders.org.uk

Youthline: 0808 801 0711 fyp@beateatingdisorders.org.uk

Studentline: 0808 801 0811 studentline@beateatingdisorders.org.uk

For services in your area: helpfinder.beateatingdisorders.org.uk

Young Minds – Mental Health Charity for Young People

Information, advice and support for young people who are struggling with their mental health. Includes specific guidance around eating problems.

<https://youngminds.org.uk/>

@youngmindsuk

FB YoungMinds

Connect-ed – NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde

Information and advice about eating disorders and the specialist service for all Young people under 18 years old with Eating Disorders in Glasgow and Clyde Connect-ED provide services for under 18 year olds in Greater Glasgow and Clyde.

<https://www.nhsggc.org.uk/your-health/health-services/specialist-childrens-services/our-services/eating-disorders-connect-ed/#>

Mind – Mental Health Charity

Information, advice and support for anyone experiencing mental health difficulties. Includes specific information about eating problems.

<https://www.mind.org.uk/>

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/eating-problems/about-eating-problems/>

Anorexia and Bulimia Care

Advice, information and support for young people, carers and professionals.

<https://www.anorexiabulimiacare.org.uk/>

East Renfrewshire Healthier Minds – Wellbeing Resource

Information and advice on promoting and supporting the mental wellbeing of young people.

<https://blogs.glowscotland.org.uk/er/healthierminds/>

Healthier Minds service

<https://blogs.glowscotland.org.uk/er/healthierminds/how-and-when-agencies-can-help/healthier-minds-service-2/information-for-children-and-young-people/>

Conversation Starters – further information

Eating disorders.com: [How to talk to someone you're worried about](#)

Beat: [10 Helpful Things to Say to Someone With an Eating Disorder](#)