

MEN AND EATING DISORDERS

The term 'eating disorder' refers to a complex, potentially life-threatening condition, characterised by severe disturbances in eating behaviours.

Eating disorders are serious mental health conditions that can affect men and women, at any age.

Eating disorders can be seen as a way of coping with emotional distress, or as a symptom of underlying issues.

It is a common misperception that eating disorders only affect women. The reality is that eating disorders affect both men and women, boys and girls.

When trying to understand and/or support a man with an eating disorder it can be helpful to be mindful that eating disorders can present in different ways in males and that there are certain risk factors that are more 'male oriented' to be aware of.

For example, rather than restricting their diet, men affected by anorexia may focus more on over-exercising and behaviours focussed on building muscle mass.

While eating disorders may present somewhat differently in men, in terms of treatment and the recovery process, anyone experiencing an eating disorder needs help and support to embark on, and continue with, the journey of recovery.

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**We are a voice, a listening ear,
a support for those affected by
eating disorders and their families.**

SERVICES

- Email Support Service
- 24 Hour Helpline Support
- Drop-in Service
- 1-1 Support
- Monthly Support Groups
- Early Intervention/Prevention Programmes for Schools and Youth Groups
- Workshops for Professionals

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WHAT CAUSES EATING DISORDERS?

There is no single cause that can explain why a person develops an eating disorder.

It is usually a combination of factors (biological, psychological, familial and socio-cultural) that come together to create conditions in which an eating disorder is more likely to develop.

The disorder often develops gradually as a response to an upset in a person's life. This could be a traumatic event, a loss or major change in a person's life, bullying, an overload of stress, and/or critical comments about weight or shape. Sometimes, it is not obvious what the trigger may have been.

Body image issues and feelings of low self-esteem are often significant factors in the development of an eating disorder. Men as well as women are increasingly pressurised to measure themselves against unrealistic standards. When these messages are internalised they can erode a person's feelings of self-worth.

Types of eating disorder include:

- Anorexia Nervosa is characterised by the deliberate refusal to eat enough to maintain a normal body weight.
- Bulimia Nervosa is characterised by repeated episodes of binge-eating followed by behaviour aimed at compensating for the out of control eating.
- Binge Eating Disorder (or Compulsive Overeating) is characterised by periods of compulsive binge eating or overeating.
- OSFED (Other Specified Feeding or Eating Disorder) refers to a condition where a person may meet some but not all of the diagnostic criteria for one of the other defined eating disorders.

RISK FACTORS FOR MEN

There are many reasons why people develop eating disorders and often the combination of events, feelings and pressures is what leaves a person feeling unable to cope.

For men, specific risk factors include:

- Being overweight for their height and age as children, and/or being teased or bullied about their weight.
- A history of dieting, which is one of the most powerful eating disorder triggers for both men and women.
- Being excessively concerned with fitness, which in turn can lead to over-exercising. Men may become preoccupied with developing a particular physique (and this may begin to take over from concerns about their health).
- Participation in a sport that demands thinness. Runners and jockeys may be at particular risk.
- A job or profession that demands thinness. Male models, actors and entertainers are at higher risk than the general population.

Some men may experience severe distress due to a form of body image disturbance known as Muscle Dysmorphia.

A person with this disorder may become obsessed with the belief that they are not muscular enough, despite the fact that they may in fact be above average in terms of muscle mass. Often the person will engage in intensive over-exercising and other harmful behaviours in an effort to develop their physique.

Muscle dysmorphia is a very specific type of body dysmorphic disorder and should be addressed with the support of a medical professional.

GETTING HELP

The misconception that eating disorders are a 'female issue' can sometimes make it harder for a man to acknowledge to himself or others that there is a problem of this nature. This in turn can mean that a man is less likely to seek support and help for an eating disorder or related issue.

Combating this stigma with an understanding that an eating disorder is a serious mental health issue that develops for numerous reasons and is not just about food, weight and appearance, is the first step to being able to encourage and facilitate a man seeking out the help and support he needs to let this disorder go.

It is important to remember that the earlier treatment is sought, the earlier a person may move towards recovery.

All eating disorders involve physical, psychological, behavioural and emotional aspects and as such for treatment to be effective for both men and women, all of these need to be addressed in some way.

If you are concerned about taking the first step towards recovery, the non-judgemental support provided by EDA NI services could be a helpful starting point.

