

Binge Eating Disorder

Symptoms, Treatment, and Help for Compulsive Overeating



All of us eat too much from time to time. But if you regularly overeat while feeling out of control and powerless to stop, you may be suffering from binge eating disorder. You may eat to the point of discomfort, then be plagued by feelings of guilt, shame, or depression afterwards, beat yourself up for your lack of self-control, or worry about what compulsive eating will do to your body. As powerless as you may feel about your eating disorder, it's important to know that binge eating disorder is treatable. You can learn to break the binge eating cycle, develop a healthier relationship with food, and feel good about yourself again.

What is binge eating disorder?

Binge eating disorder is a common eating disorder where you frequently eat large amounts of food while feeling powerless to stop and extremely distressed during or after eating. Binge eating disorder typically begins in late adolescence or early adulthood, often after a major diet. During a binge, you may eat even when you're not hungry and continue eating long after you're full. You may also binge so fast you barely register what you're eating or tasting. Unlike [bulimia](#), however, there are no regular attempts to "make up" for the binges through vomiting, fasting, or over-exercising.

You may find that binge eating is comforting for a brief moment, helping to ease unpleasant emotions or feelings of stress, depression, or anxiety. But then reality sets back in and you're flooded with feelings of regret and self-loathing. Binge eating often leads to weight gain and obesity, which only reinforces compulsive eating. The worse you feel about yourself and your appearance, the more you use food to cope. It becomes a vicious cycle: eating to feel better, feeling even worse, and then turning back to food for relief. As much as you may feel powerless to break this cycle, there are plenty of things you can do to better manage your emotions and regain control over your eating and your health.

Signs and symptoms

If you have binge eating disorder, you may feel embarrassed and ashamed about your eating habits, and try to hide your symptoms by eating in secret.

Behavioral symptoms of binge eating and compulsive overeating

- Inability to stop eating or control what you're eating
- Rapidly eating large amounts of food
- Eating even when you're full
- Hiding or stockpiling food to eat later in secret
- Eating normally around others, but gorging when you're alone
- Eating continuously throughout the day, with no planned mealtimes

Emotional symptoms

- Feeling stress or tension that is only relieved by eating
- Embarrassment over how much you're eating
- Feeling numb while bingeing—like you're not really there or you're on auto-pilot.
- Never feeling satisfied, no matter how much you eat
- Feeling guilty, disgusted, or depressed after overeating
- Desperation to control weight and eating habits

Do you have binge eating disorder?

- Do you feel out of control when you're eating?
- Do you think about food all the time?
- Do you eat in secret?
- Do you eat until you feel sick?
- Do you eat to escape from worries, relieve stress, or to comfort yourself?
- Do you feel disgusted or ashamed after eating?
- Do you feel powerless to stop eating, even though you want to?

The more “yes” answers, the more likely it is that you have binge eating disorder.

Causes and effects

Generally, it takes a combination of things to develop binge eating disorder—including your genes, emotions, and experience.

Social and cultural risk factors. Social pressure to be thin can add to the you feel and

fuel your emotional eating. Some parents unwittingly set the stage for binge eating by using food to comfort, dismiss, or reward their children. Children who are exposed to frequent critical comments about their bodies and weight are also vulnerable, as are those who have been sexually abused in childhood.

Psychological risk factors. [Depression](#) and binge eating are strongly linked. Many binge eaters are either depressed or have been before; others may have trouble with impulse control and managing and expressing their feelings. Low self-esteem, loneliness, and body dissatisfaction may also contribute to binge eating.

Biological risk factors. Biological abnormalities can contribute to binge eating. For example, the hypothalamus (the part of your brain that controls appetite) may not be sending correct messages about hunger and fullness. Researchers have also found a genetic mutation that appears to cause food addiction. Finally, there is evidence that low levels of the brain chemical serotonin play a role in compulsive eating.

Effects of binge eating disorder

Binge eating leads to a wide variety of physical, emotional, and social problems. You're more likely to suffer health issues, stress, insomnia, and suicidal thoughts than someone without an eating disorder. You may also experience depression, anxiety, and substance abuse as well as substantial weight gain.

As bleak as this sounds, though, many people are able to recover from binge eating disorder and reverse the unhealthy effects. You can, too. The first step is to re-evaluate your relationship with food.

Binge eating recovery tip 1: Develop a healthier relationship with food

Recovery from any addiction is challenging, but it can be especially difficult to overcome binge eating and food addiction. Unlike other addictions, your "drug" is necessary for survival, so you don't have the option of avoiding or replacing it. Instead, you need to develop a healthier relationship with food—a relationship that's based on meeting your nutritional needs, not your emotional ones. To do this, you have to break the binge eating cycle by:

The Binge Eating Cycle



Avoiding temptation. You're much more likely to overeat if you have junk food, desserts, and unhealthy snacks in the house. Remove the temptation by clearing your fridge and cupboards of your favorite binge foods.

Listening to your body. Learn to distinguish between physical and emotional hunger. If you ate recently and don't have a rumbling stomach, you're probably not really hungry. Give the craving time to pass.

Eating regularly. Don't wait until you're starving. This only leads to overeating! Stick to scheduled mealtimes, as skipping meals often leads to binge eating later in the day.

Not avoiding fat. Contrary to what you might think, dietary fat can actually help keep you from overeating and gaining weight. Try to [incorporate healthy fat at each meal](#) to keep you feeling satisfied and full.

Fighting boredom. Instead of snacking when you're bored, distract yourself. Take a walk, call a friend, read, or take up a hobby such as painting or gardening.

Focusing on what you're eating. How often have you binged in an almost trance-like state, not even enjoying what you're consuming? [Instead of eating mindlessly, be a mindful eater](#). Slow down and savor the textures and flavors. Not only will you eat less, you'll enjoy it more.

The importance of deciding not to diet

After a binge, it's only natural to feel the need to diet to compensate for overeating and to get back on track with your health. But dieting usually backfires. The deprivation and hunger that comes with strict dieting triggers food cravings and the urge to overeat.

Instead of dieting, focus on eating in moderation. Find nutritious foods that you enjoy and eat only until you feel content, not uncomfortably stuffed. Avoid banning or restricting certain foods, as this can make you crave them even more. Instead of saying “I can never eat ice cream,” say “I will eat ice cream as an occasional treat.”

Tip 2: Find better ways to feed your feelings

One of the most common reasons for binge eating is an attempt to manage unpleasant emotions such as stress, depression, loneliness, fear, and anxiety. When you have a bad day, it can seem like food is your only friend. Binge eating can temporarily make feelings such as stress, sadness, anxiety, depression, and boredom evaporate into thin air. But the relief is very fleeting.

Identify your triggers with a food and mood diary

One of the best ways to identify the patterns behind your binge eating is to keep track with a food and mood diary. Every time you overeat or feel compelled to reach for your version of comfort food Kryptonite, take a moment to figure out what triggered the urge. If you backtrack, you'll usually find an upsetting event that kicked off the binge.

Write it all down in your food and mood diary: what you ate (or wanted to eat), what happened to upset you, how you felt before you ate, what you felt as you were eating, and how you felt afterward. Over time, you'll see a pattern emerge.

Learn to tolerate the feelings that trigger your binge eating

The next time you feel the urge to binge, instead of giving in, take a moment to stop and investigate what's going on inside.

Identify the emotion you're feeling. Do your best to name what you're feeling. Is it anxiety? Shame? Hopelessness? Anger? Loneliness? Fear? Emptiness?

Accept the experience you're having. Avoidance and resistance only make negative emotions stronger. Instead, try to accept what you're feeling without judging it or yourself.

Dig deeper. Explore what's going on. Where do you feel the emotion in your body? What kinds of thoughts are going through your head?

Distance yourself. Realize that you are NOT your feelings. Emotions are passing events, like clouds moving across the sky. They don't define who you are.

Sitting with your feelings may feel extremely uncomfortable at first. Maybe even impossible. But as you resist the urge to binge, you'll start to realize that you don't have to give in.

There are other ways to cope. Even emotions that feel intolerable are only temporary. They'll quickly pass if you stop fighting them. You're still in control. You can choose how to respond.

For a step-by-step guide to learning how to manage unpleasant and uncomfortable emotions, check out HelpGuide's free [Emotional Intelligence Toolkit](#).

Tip 3: Take back control of cravings

Sometimes it feels like the urge to binge hits without warning. But even when you're in the grip of a seemingly overpowering and uncontrollable urge, there are things you can do to help yourself stay in control.

Accept the urge and ride it out, instead of trying to fight it. This is known as "urge surfing." Think of the urge to binge as an ocean wave that will soon crest, break, and dissipate. When you ride out the urge, without trying to battle, judge, or ignore it, you'll see that it passes more quickly than you'd think.

Distract yourself. Anything that engages your attention will work: taking a walk, calling a friend, watching something funny online, etc. Once you get interested in something else, the urge to binge may go away.

Talk to someone. When you start to notice the urge to binge, turn to a friend or family member you trust. Sharing what you're going through can help you feel better and discharge the urge to binge.

Delay, delay, delay. Even if you're unsure if you'll be able to fight the urge to binge, make an effort to delay it. Try to hold off for 1 minute. If you succeed. Try to stretch it out to 5 minutes. If you delay long enough, you may be able to avoid the binge.

Tip 4: Support yourself with healthy lifestyle habits

When you're physically strong, relaxed, and well rested, you're better able to handle the curveballs that life inevitably throws your way. But when you're already exhausted and overwhelmed, any little hiccup has the potential to send you off the rails and straight toward the refrigerator. Exercise, sleep, and other healthy lifestyle habits will help you get through difficult times without binge eating.

Make time for regular exercise. Physical activity does wonders for your mood and your energy levels, and it's also a powerful stress reducer. The natural mood-boosting effects of

[exercise](#) can help put a stop to emotional eating.

Get enough sleep every night. When you don't get the sleep you need, your body craves sugary foods that will give you a quick energy boost. Sleep deprivation may even trigger food addiction. [Getting plenty of rest](#) will help with appetite control and reduce food cravings, and support your mood.

Connect with others. Don't underestimate the importance of [close relationships](#) and social activities. You're more likely to succumb to binge eating triggers if you lack a solid support network. Talking helps, even if it's not with a professional.

Manage stress. One of the most important aspects of controlling binge eating is to find alternate ways to [handle stress](#) and other overwhelming feelings without using food. These may include meditating, using sensory relaxation strategies, and practicing simple breathing exercises.

How to help someone with binge eating disorder

Since binge eaters often try to hide their symptoms and eat in secret, it can make it tough for family and friends to spot the warning signs. And you can't always identify a binge eater by appearance, either. While some are overweight or obese, others manage to maintain a normal weight.

The warning signs that you can spot include finding piles of empty food packages and wrappers, cupboards and refrigerators that have been cleaned out, or hidden stashes of high-calorie or junk food. If you suspect that your loved one has binge eating disorder, bring up your concerns. It may seem daunting to start such a delicate conversation, and the person may deny bingeing or become angry and defensive. But there's a chance that he or she will welcome the opportunity to share the struggle.

If the person shuts you out at first, don't give up; it may take some time before your loved one is willing to admit to having a problem. And remember: as difficult as it is to know that someone you love may have an eating disorder, you can't force someone to change. The decision to seek recovery has to come from them. You can help by offering your compassion, encouragement, and support throughout the treatment process.

Tips for helping someone with binge eating disorder

Encourage him or her to seek help. The longer an eating disorder remains undiagnosed and untreated, the more difficult it will be to overcome, so urge your loved one to get treatment.

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Be supportive. Try to listen without judgment and make sure the person knows you care. If your loved one slips up on the road to recovery, remind them that it doesn't mean they can't quit binge eating for good.

Avoid insults, lectures, or guilt trips. Binge eaters feel bad enough about themselves and their behavior already. Lecturing, getting upset, or issuing ultimatums to a binge eater will only increase stress and make the situation worse. Instead, make it clear that you care about the person's health and happiness and you'll continue to be there.

Set a good example by eating healthily, exercising, and managing stress without food. Don't make negative comments about your own body or anyone else's.

Where to turn for help

In the U.S.: [National Eating Disorders Association](#) or call 1-800-931-2237 (National Eating Disorders Association)

UK: [Beat Eating Disorders](#) or call 0345 643 1414 (Helpfinder)

Australia: [Butterfly Foundation for Eating Disorders](#) or call 1800 33 4673 (National Eating Disorders Collaboration)

Canada: [Service Provider Directory](#) or call 1-866-633-4220 (NEDIC)

Worldwide support groups:

[Overeaters Anonymous](#) - Find a 12-step meeting for binge eating recovery. (Overeaters Anonymous)

[Eating Disorders Anonymous](#) - Find support and group meetings with other eating disorder sufferers in your area. (Eating Disorders Anonymous)

Recommended reading

[Binge Eating Disorder](#) - Symptoms, causes, and treatment options for binge eating disorder. (National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases)

[Compulsive Overeating and Binge Eating Disorder](#) - Compulsive overeating and its causes. (The National Centre for Eating Disorders)

[Binge Eating Disorder](#) - Written for teens, this article describes the symptoms, causes, effects, and treatment of binge eating disorder. (TeensHealth)

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Authors: Melinda Smith, M.A., Lawrence Robinson, and Jeanne Segal, Ph.D. Last updated: March 2019.