



Eating Disorder Treatment and Recovery

How to Overcome Your Eating Disorder and Gain True Self-Confidence



The inner voices of anorexia and bulimia whisper that you'll never be happy until you lose weight, that your worth is measured by how you look. But the truth is that happiness and self-esteem come from loving yourself for who you truly are—and that's only possible with recovery. And while it may seem like there's no escape from your eating disorder, recovery is within your reach. With treatment, support, and these self-help strategies, you can find healthier ways to cope with negative feelings, overcome your eating disorder, and gain true self-confidence.

How do I begin recovery from an eating disorder?

The road to eating disorder recovery starts with admitting you have a problem. This admission can be tough, especially if you're still clinging to the belief—even in the back of your mind—that weight loss is the key to happiness, confidence, and success. Even when you finally understand this isn't true, old habits are still hard to break.

The good news is that the eating disorder behaviors you've learned can be unlearned if you're motivated to change and willing to ask for help. However, overcoming an eating disorder is about more than giving up unhealthy eating behaviors. It's also about rediscovering who you are beyond your eating habits, weight, and body image.

True recovery from eating disorders involves learning to:

- ▶ Listen to your feelings.

- ▶ Listen to your body.
- ▶ Accept yourself.
- ▶ Love yourself.

This may seem like a lot to tackle, but just remember that you're not alone. Help for eating disorders is out there; all you have to do is ask!

The first step to recovery: Reaching out for support

It can be scary and embarrassing to seek help for an eating disorder, but opening up about the problem is an important step on the road to recovery. However, it's important to choose someone who will be supportive and truly listen without judging you or rejecting you. This could be a close friend or family member or a youth leader, teacher, or school counselor you trust. Or you may be more comfortable confiding in a therapist or doctor.

Tips for talking to someone about your eating disorder

There are no hard and fast rules for telling someone about your eating disorder. But be mindful about choosing the right time and place—ideally somewhere private where you won't be rushed or interrupted.

Starting the conversation. This can be the hardest part. One way to start is by simply saying, "I've got something important to tell you. It's difficult for me to talk about this, so it would mean a lot if you'd be patient and hear me out." From there, you may want to talk about when your eating disorder started, the feelings, thoughts, and behaviors involved, and how the disorder has impacted you.

Be patient. Your friend or family member will have their own emotional reaction to learning about your eating disorder. They may feel shocked, helpless, confused, sad, or even angry. They may not know how to respond or help you. Give them time to digest what you're telling them. It's also important to educate them about your specific eating disorder.

Be specific about how the person can best support you. For example, checking in with you regularly about how you're feeling, helping you finding treatment, or finding ways to support your recovery without turning into the food police.

Eating disorder support groups

While family and friends can be a huge help in providing support, you may also want to join an eating disorder support group. They provide a safe environment where you can talk freely about your eating disorder and get advice and support from people who know what you're going through.

There are many types of eating disorder support groups. Some are led by professional therapists, while others are moderated by trained volunteers or people who have recovered from an eating disorder. You can find online anorexia and bulimia support groups, chat rooms, and forums. These can be particularly helpful if you're not ready to seek face-to-face help or you don't have a support group in your area.

For help finding an eating disorder support group:

- Ask your doctor or therapist for a referral
- Call local hospitals and universities
- Call local eating disorder centers and clinics
- Visit your school's counseling center
- Call a helpline listed in the Resources section below

Help for eating disorders

For help and support for anorexia and bulimia in the U.S., **call 1-800-931-2237**, a toll-free hotline offered by the National Eating Disorder Association. In other countries, see the Resources section below for a helpline in your area.

Getting treatment

While there are a variety of different treatment options available for those struggling with eating disorders, it is important to find the treatment, or combination of treatments, that works best for you.

Effective treatment for eating disorders should address more than just your symptoms and destructive eating habits. It should also address the root causes of the problem—the emotional triggers that lead to disordered eating and your difficulty coping with stress, anxiety, fear, sadness, and other uncomfortable emotions.

Step 1: Assemble your treatment team

Because eating disorders have serious emotional, medical, and nutritional consequences, it's important to have a team of professionals that can address every aspect of your problem. As you search, focus on finding the right fit—professionals who make you feel comfortable, accepted, and safe.

To find an eating disorder treatment specialist in your area:

- ▶ Ask your primary care doctor for a referral
- ▶ Check with your local hospitals or medical centers
- ▶ Ask your school counselor or nurse
- ▶ Call a helpline listed in the Resources section below

Step 2: Address health problems

Eating disorders can be deadly—and not just if you're drastically underweight. Your health may be in danger, even if you only occasionally fast, binge, or purge, so it's important to get a full medical evaluation. If the evaluation reveals health problems, they should take priority. Nothing is more important than your physical well-being. If you're suffering from any life-threatening problem, you may need to be hospitalized in order to keep you safe.

Step 3: Make a long-term treatment plan

Once your health problems are under control, you and your treatment team can work on a long-term eating disorder recovery plan. Your treatment plan may include:

Individual or group therapy. Therapy can help you explore the issues underlying your eating disorder, improve your self-esteem, and learn healthy ways of responding to stress and emotional pain. Different therapists have different methods, so it is important to discuss with a therapist your goals in working towards recovery.

Family therapy. Family therapy can help you and your family members explore how the eating disorder is affecting your relationships—and how various family dynamics may be contributing to the problem or impeding recovery. Together, you'll work to improve communication, respect, and support.

Nutritional counseling. The goal of a nutritionist or dietician is to help you incorporate healthy eating behaviors into your everyday life. A nutritionist can't change your habits overnight, but over a period of time you can learn to develop a healthier relationship with food.

Medical monitoring. Often, treatment will include regular monitoring by a medical doctor to make sure your health is not in danger. This may include regular weigh-ins, blood tests, and other health screenings.

Residential treatment. In rare cases, you may need more support than can be provided on an outpatient basis. Residential treatment programs offer around-the-clock care and monitoring to get you back on track. The goal is to get you stable enough to continue treatment at home.

Step 4: Learn self-help strategies

While seeking professional help is important, don't underestimate your own role in recovery. The more motivated you are to understand while you developed an eating disorder, and to learn healthier coping skills, the quicker you will see change and healing.

Learning healthier ways to cope with uncomfortable feelings

It may seem like eating disorders are all about food—after all, your rules and fears about dieting and weight have taken over your life. But food itself isn't the problem. Disordered eating is a coping mechanism—whether you refuse food to feel in control, binge for comfort, or purge to punish yourself. But you can learn [healthier ways to cope with negative emotions](/articles/mental-health/emotional-intelligence-toolkit.htm) (/articles/mental-health/emotional-intelligence-toolkit.htm).

What emotional need does your eating disorder fill?

The first step is figuring out what's really going on inside. Are you upset about something? Depressed? Stressed out? Lonely? Is there an intense feeling you're trying to avoid? Are you eating to calm down, comfort yourself, or to relieve boredom? Once you identify the emotion you're experiencing, you can choose a positive alternative to starving or stuffing yourself.

Here are a few suggestions to get you started:

- ▶ Call a friend
- ▶ Listen to music
- ▶ Play with a pet
- ▶ Read a good book
- ▶ Take a walk
- ▶ Write in a journal

- ▶ Go to the movies
- ▶ Get out into nature
- ▶ Play a favorite game
- ▶ Do something helpful for someone else

Coping with anorexia and bulimia: Emotional Do's and Don'ts

Do...

- allow yourself to be vulnerable with people you trust
- fully experience every emotion
- be open and accepting of all your emotions
- use people to comfort you when you feel bad, instead of focusing on food
- let your emotions come and go as they please without fear

Don't...

- pretend you don't feel anything when you do
- let people shame or humiliate you for having or expressing feelings
- avoid feelings because they make you uncomfortable
- worry about your feelings making you fall apart
- focus on food when you're experiencing a painful emotion

Adapted from: *The Food and Feelings Workbook*, by Karin R. Koeing, Gurze Books

Developing a balanced relationship with food

Even though food itself is not the problem, developing a healthier relationship with it is essential to eating disorder recovery. Most people with eating disorders struggle with issues of control when it comes to food—often vacillating between rigidity and chaos. The goal is to find a balance.

Let go of rigid eating rules. Strict rules about food and eating fuel eating disorders, so it's important to replace them with healthier ones. For example, if you have a rule forbidding all desserts, change it into a less rigid guideline such as, "I won't eat dessert every day." You won't gain weight by enjoying an occasional ice cream or cookie.

Don't diet. The more you restrict food, the more likely it is that you'll become preoccupied, and even obsessed, with it. So instead of focusing on what you "shouldn't" eat, focus on nutritious foods that will energize you and make your body strong. Think of food as fuel for your body. Your body knows when the tank is low, so listen to it. Eat when you're truly hungry, then stop when you're full.

Stick to a regular eating schedule. You may be used to skipping meals or fasting for long stretches. But when you starve yourself, food becomes all you think about. To avoid this preoccupation, make sure to eat every three hours. Plan ahead for meals and snacks, and don't skip!

Learn to listen to your body. If you have an eating disorder, you've learned to ignore your body's hunger and fullness signals. You may not even recognize them anymore. The goal is to get back in touch with these internal cues, so you can eat based on your physiological needs.

Learning to accept and love yourself as you are

When you base your self-worth on physical appearance alone, you're ignoring all the other qualities, accomplishments, and abilities that make you beautiful. Think about your friends and family members. Do they love you for the way you look or who you are? Chances are, your appearance ranks low on the list of what they love about you—and you probably feel the same about them. So why does it top your own list?

Placing too much importance on how you look leads to low self-esteem and insecurity. But you can learn to see yourself in a positive, balanced way:

Make a list of your positive qualities. Think of all the things you like about yourself. Are you smart? Kind? Creative? Loyal? Funny? What would others say are your good qualities? Include your talents, skills, and achievements. Also, think about negative qualities you DON'T have.

Focus on what you like about your body. Instead of searching for flaws when you look in the mirror, appreciate the things you like about your appearance. If you're distracted by "imperfections," remind yourself that nobody's perfect. Even supermodels get airbrushed.

Challenge negative self-talk (</articles/depression/coping-with-depression.htm#negative>). When you catch yourself being self-critical or pessimistic, stop and challenge the negative thought. Ask yourself what evidence you have to support the idea. What is the evidence against it? Just because you believe something, doesn't mean it's true.

Tips to improve your body image

Dress for yourself, not others. You should feel good in what you wear. Pick clothes that express your personality and make you feel comfortable and confident.

Stay away from the scale. If your weight needs to be monitored, leave that up to the doctors. Your goal right now is to learn to accept yourself—and that shouldn't depend on a number on the scale.

Toss the fashion magazines. Even knowing that the images are pure Photoshopped fantasy, they can still trigger feelings of insecurity and inferiority. It's best to stay away until you're confident they won't undermine your self-acceptance.

Pamper your body. Instead of treating your body like the enemy, look at it as something precious. Pamper yourself with a massage, manicure, facial, a candlelight bath, or a scented lotion or perfume that makes you happy.



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[Mental Health Benefits of Exercise](/articles/healthy-living/the-mental-health-benefits-of-exercise.htm) (/articles/healthy-living/the-mental-health-benefits-of-exercise.htm)

Stay active. While it's important not to overdo it with exercise, [staying active](/articles/healthy-living/the-mental-health-benefits-of-exercise.htm) (/articles/healthy-living/the-mental-health-benefits-of-exercise.htm) is good for both your mental and physical well-being. Outdoor activities can provide even more of a boost.

Tips for avoiding eating disorder relapse

The work of eating disorder recovery doesn't end once you've adopted healthier habits. It's important to take steps to maintain your progress and prevent relapse.

Develop a solid support system. Surround yourself with people who support you and want to see you healthy and happy. Avoid people who drain your energy, encourage disordered eating behaviors, or make you feel bad about yourself.

Identify your "triggers." Are you more likely to revert to your old, destructive behaviors during the holidays, exam week, or swimsuit season? Know what your triggers are, and have a plan for dealing with them, such as going to therapy more often or asking for extra support from family and friends.

Avoid pro-ana and pro-mia websites. Don't visit websites that promote or glorify anorexia and bulimia. These sites are run by people who want excuses to continue down their destructive path. The "support" they offer is dangerous and will only get in the way of your recovery.

Keep a journal. Writing in a daily journal can help you keep tabs on your thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. If you notice that you're slipping back into negative patterns, take action immediately.

Stick with your eating disorder treatment plan. Don't neglect therapy or other components of your treatment, even if you're doing better. Follow the recommendations of your treatment team.



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[Volunteering and its Surprising Benefits](/articles/healthy-living/volunteering-and-its-surprising-benefits.htm) (/articles/healthy-living/volunteering-and-its-surprising-benefits.htm)

Fill your life with positive activities. Make time for activities that bring you joy and fulfillment. Try something you've always wanted to do, develop a new skill, pick up a fun hobby, or [volunteer in your community](/articles/healthy-living/volunteering-and-its-surprising-benefits.htm) (/articles/healthy-living/volunteering-and-its-surprising-benefits.htm). The more rewarding your life, the less desire you'll have to focus on food and weight.

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