

# Eating Disorders

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The Quest for Thinness

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**D**o you ever wish that you could just forget about food? What started as an innocent diet has turned into a monster. You eat too little. You eat too much. You restrict. You binge. It's getting harder to cover up what you are doing. At first you tried exercise, then vomiting, then laxatives. Maybe you tried cutting too. Who would have thought that food—or the fear of it—would become the center of your life? Heroin, cocaine, and other street drugs lead to addictions. But food?

For you food is no longer . . . just food.

You know, of course, that you are not alone; many people struggle with eating disorders. It's easy to see why. Advertisers sell their products using only one slim body type; movies show impossibly thin, surgically enhanced heroes and heroines; high-profile athletes have body fat percentages that can only be maintained with round-the-clock workouts; food is everywhere; and more than half the U.S. is on a diet. In some countries food is nutrition. Here

food is nutrition, but it also means beauty, control, comfort, guilt, shame, love, and loathing.

### **Food Problems Start Small**

You began life with normal eating habits: You ate when you were hungry and didn't eat when you were full. But in a weight-conscious world, where food is used for comfort, you take small steps and "normal" gradually disappears. You want to be thin, so you become more serious about dieting. You like how food makes you feel, so you overeat and binge. Those who are close to you start noticing that food is becoming your obsession. You don't see it because your obsession has tricked you into thinking you are doing better than ever. But the truth is that your struggles with food have gained momentum, and you have become anorexic, bulimic, or both.

### **What Is Anorexia?**

Anorexia is all about *not eating*. It is an all-consuming fear of fat that leads you to starve yourself. Your fear

might also lead you to try constant exercising, vomiting, and/or taking laxatives. What happens when these things don't make you feel any better? Your next step might be another form of self-punishment such as cutting. When others try to help you, it's easy for you to make them your enemy. You don't want *anyone* standing between you and what you believe you need.

### **What Is Bulimia?**

Bulimia is all about *overeating*. A lot of food eaten secretly and rapidly is its trademark. In contrast to anorexia's control, bulimia is impulsive and out of control. Anorexia wants control, and seems to invite pain. Bulimia feels out of control, and wants comfort and relief. The two seem like complete opposites, but eventually, as your struggles with eating continue, they might look almost the same (see *Figure 1*). If you start as an anorexic, sooner or later you might use the same weight-loss strategies as someone with bulimia. If you are bulimic, you

might also use the anorexic devices of self-punishment and food restriction to make up for a binge.

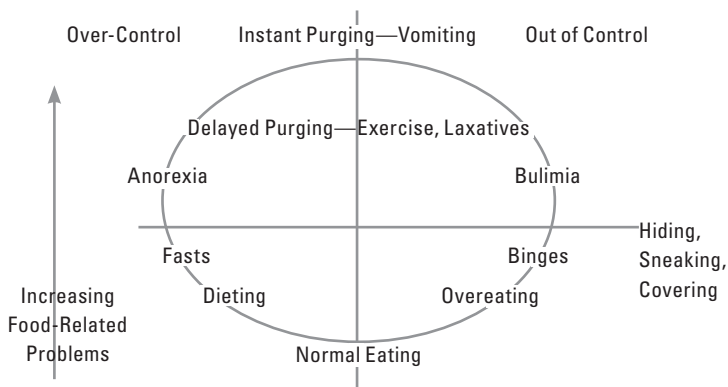


FIGURE 1: A MAP OF FOOD-RELATED PROBLEMS

### How Did You Get Stuck?

How did you get into this cycle? Most people enter this cycle as a way of dealing with troubling, unwanted feelings—anger, pain, loneliness, guilt, self-loathing, and so on (see *Figure 2*). Without knowing what to do with your emotions, you starve them by restricting food or comfort them by binging on food. You might feel a little better