



ITEC



VTCT

UMH6 – Understanding eating disorders

Learning outcomes

LO1 Understand eating disorders

LO2 Understand the causes of eating disorders

LO3 Understand how eating disorders can affect individuals and others

LO4 Understand how to manage and support people with eating disorders



LO1: Content and Assessment criteria

1.1. Define what is meant by an eating disorder

1.2. Differentiate between anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge eating



Definitions and descriptions

- **Eating disorders** are medical illnesses characterised by severe disturbances in a person's eating behaviours (National Institute of Mental Health 2018)
- Eating disorders are complex mental illnesses that can affect anyone, no matter what their age, gender, ethnicity or background
- Eating disorders are associated with abnormal attitudes towards eating, with marked extremes that can impact on a person's physical, mental and social wellbeing
- Common eating disorders include anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge-eating disorder



Anorexia nervosa

This is a serious mental illness where people are of low weight due to limiting how much they eat and drink.

People with anorexia nervosa can become dangerously underweight but may see themselves as overweight.

- There are **two main** subtypes of anorexia nervosa:
 - **Restrictive** – placing severe restrictions on the amount and type of food consumed
 - **Binge-Purge** – placing severe restrictions on the amount and type of food consumed but in addition, showing binge eating and purging behaviours such as vomiting, use of laxatives and diuretics



Common signs and symptoms of anorexia nervosa

Behavioural:

- Not being truthful about how much weight they have lost
- Strict dieting and avoiding food they think is fattening
- Excessive calorie counting
- Eating only low-calorie food, or otherwise limiting the type of food they will eat
- Missing meals
- Avoiding eating with other people
- Hiding food
- Cutting food into very small pieces to make it less obvious how much they have eaten



Common signs and symptoms of anorexia nervosa

Behavioural:

- Taking appetite suppressants, such as slimming or diet pills
- Obsessive behaviours around food
- Irritability
- Excessive exercising
- Vomiting or misusing laxatives (purging)
- Social withdrawal and isolation
- Wearing baggy clothing to hide their body



Common signs and symptoms of anorexia nervosa

Psychological:

- Abnormal fear of excess bodyweight
- Distorted perception of body shape or weight
- Denial that an eating disorder exists, even after diagnosis
- Anxiety associated with eating in public
- Low confidence and self-esteem
- Difficulty concentrating
- The development of other mental illnesses, such as depression, anxiety, or obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)



Common signs and symptoms of anorexia nervosa

Physical:

- Weight loss
- Irregular periods, or periods stopping altogether
- Lack of sexual interest
- Difficulty sleeping
- Tiredness
- Feeling dizzy
- Stomach pains
- Constipation
- Bloating



Common signs and symptoms of anorexia nervosa

Physical:

- Growth of soft, fine hair all over your body (called lanugo)
- Hair loss
- Physical weakness
- Loss of muscle strength
- Effects on hormone levels
- Swelling in their feet, hands or face (known as oedema)



Bulimia nervosa

- A serious mental illness that is characterised by episodes of overeating (binge eating) and feeling out of control of these episodes, followed by compensatory behaviours such as vomiting and excessive use of laxatives (purging)
- Unlike anorexia nervosa, people with bulimia nervosa may maintain a normal weight or be overweight



Common signs and symptoms of bulimia nervosa

Behavioural

- Extreme attention to body shape or weight – excessive or avoidance of checking bodyweight
- Comparing their body with those of others
- Binge eating and purging
- Organising life around eating and purging behaviour
- Secrecy, especially about eating
- Hoarding food
- Mood swings
- Irritability
- Social withdrawal



Common signs and symptoms of bulimia nervosa

Behavioural

- Misuse of laxatives and diuretics
- Misuse of alcohol
- Self-harm
- Compromise of education and employment plans
- Disappearing during or soon after eating (in order to purge)
- Excessive exercising
- Lack of sexual interest



Common signs and symptoms of bulimia nervosa

Psychological

- Excessive thinking about food
- Anxiety around meal times or when eating in front of others
- Difficulty concentrating
- Low confidence and self-esteem
- Worries about weight and shape
- Fear of gaining weight
- Distorted perception of body shape or weight
- Feelings of loss of control over eating
- Feelings of guilt and shame after bingeing and purging
- Other mental illnesses, such as depression or anxiety



Common signs and symptoms of bulimia nervosa

Physical

- Vomiting
- Disturbed sleep patterns
- Tiredness
- Bloating and or constipation
- Stomach pain/problems
- Swelling of the hands and feet
- Poor skin condition
- Damage to teeth



Common signs and symptoms of bulimia nervosa

Physical

- Irregular or stopped periods
- Swollen salivary glands
- Calluses on the backs of the hands if fingers are used to cause vomiting
- Imbalance in electrolytes (essential substances found in the blood)
- Mood swings and fainting associated with low blood sugar levels
- Regular changes in weight – although this can remain ‘normal’ making it difficult to spot



Binge eating disorder

- This is a serious mental illness where people lose control over their eating. Unlike bulimia nervosa, periods of binge-eating are not followed by purging
- Binges can be very distressing, often involving a much larger amount of food than someone would want to eat
- As a result, people with binge eating disorder are often overweight or obese



Common signs and symptoms of binge eating disorder

Behavioural

- Buying large amounts of food
- Organising life around bingeing episodes
- Hoarding food
- Eating very rapidly
- Eating when not hungry
- Eating until uncomfortably full
- Avoiding eating around others
- Social withdrawal and isolation
- Irritability
- Mood swings



Common signs and symptoms of binge eating disorder

Psychological

- Excessive thinking about food
- Feeling out of control over eating
- Anxiety towards eating in front of others
- Low confidence and self-esteem
- Feelings of shame and guilt after bingeing
- Other mental illnesses, such as depression or anxiety



Common signs and symptoms of binge eating disorder

Physical

- Tiredness
- Disturbed sleeping patterns
- Weight gain
- Bloating and or other stomach problems
- Constipation
- Stomach pain
- Poor skin condition



LO2: Content and Assessment criteria

2.1. Outline the risk factors that can make a person more likely to develop an eating disorder

2.2. Describe the causes of anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge eating



Risk factors associated with eating disorders

It is currently not known what causes eating disorders but people may be more likely to develop an eating disorder if they have a risk factor. More than one risk factor can play a role in eating disorders.

Biological:

- Having a close relative with an eating disorder or another mental health condition increases the risk of developing one
- A history of dieting or other weight control methods
- Deliberate and/or obsessive efforts to restrict amounts and types of food they eat, e.g. as a part of an intensive athletic training routine
- Type 1 diabetes – people diagnosed with type 1 diabetes have been known to develop an eating disorder. This is associated with skipping insulin injections (diabulimia)



Risk factors associated with eating disorders

It is currently not known what causes eating disorders but people may be more likely to develop an eating disorder if they have a risk factor. More than one risk factor can play a role in eating disorders.

Psychological:

- Perfectionism and setting unrealistically high expectations are strong risk factors for eating disorders
- Dissatisfaction with body image
- History of other mental health conditions such as anxiety, social phobias or obsessive compulsive disorder



Risk factors associated with eating disorders

It is currently not known what causes eating disorders but people may be more likely to develop an eating disorder if they have a risk factor. More than one risk factor can play a role in eating disorders.

Social:

- Stereotyping and exposure to messages that thinner 'is better' can lead to dissatisfaction with your own body and therefore eating disorders. This can be linked to a notion that there is a socially defined 'ideal body type'
- Teasing and bullying about weight
- Loneliness, isolation and limited social networks are also associated with developing eating disorders



Possible causes of **anorexia nervosa**

There is no single cause for anorexia nervosa.

Most experts believe the condition is caused by a combination of psychological, environmental and biological factors. However there are a number of factors that are associated with developing anorexia nervosa.

- Traumatic or upsetting event, such as an abusive family relationship
- A family history of eating disorders or other mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety and compulsive behaviours
- The influence of media images associated with a socially accepted ideal body shape or thinness
- A history of being overweight or obese in the past
- Lifestyle circumstances or jobs where a very lean body type is desirable such as modelling or dancing



Possible causes of bulimia nervosa

There are many different reasons why someone might develop bulimia nervosa.

The condition is thought to be caused by underlying complex emotions where bingeing and purging is often a way of dealing with these intense emotions. Some factors are associated with developing bulimia nervosa such as:

- Low self-esteem
- Family history of eating disorders
- Mental illness, particularly depression
- Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)



Possible causes of **binge eating disorders**

There are lots of things that can make someone feel the urge to binge eat, however, like most eating disorders, it is seen as a way of coping with feelings of unhappiness and depression. Some factors associated with binge eating disorders, such as:

- Family history of eating disorders or depression
- Family history of alcohol and drug misuse
- Having anxiety, low self-esteem and obsessive personality
- History of being abused



LO3: Content and Assessment criteria

3.1. Explain how eating disorders affect an individual and others



Anorexia nervosa

People with anorexia nervosa have a preoccupation with body weight and a distorted perception of body shape or weight. However, like many eating disorders there can be long term physical effects on the individual such as:

- Osteoporosis
- Erosion of tooth enamel
- Fertility problems
- Heart problems
- Damage to other organs, such as the kidneys
- Weakened immune system
- Muscle loss and weakness
- Delayed onset of puberty or stunted growth in children and young teenagers
- Fatal if not treated in time



Bulimia nervosa

People with the condition usually have very low self-esteem and often think they are overweight. Some people may place unrealistic demands on themselves about dieting, eating or exercising.

People with the condition will often feel guilty about bingeing leading to purging. People with bulimia are often caught in this vicious cycle. Bulimia can also cause long term damage to the body such as:

- Permanent damage to teeth
- Damage to the vocal chords and throat
- Damage to the intestines and stomach
- Increased risk of heart problems
- Kidney damage



Binge eating disorders

People who binge eat usually feel that they have no control over their eating. They will often have feelings of guilt or disgust after binge eating. These feelings highlight underlying psychological issues, such as low self-esteem, depression and anxiety.

- The act of bingeing can lead to associated feelings of anxiety, guilt and distress
- Binge eating disorder can also have **long term physical effects** such as:
 - Obesity
 - High blood pressure
 - High cholesterol
 - Heart disease
 - Type 2 diabetes
 - Difficulty conceiving; infertility
 - Joint and back pain
 - Damage to the oesophagus and stomach
 - Arthritis
 - Gall bladder disease
 - Sleep apnoea



How eating disorders **affect others**

Living with people who have an eating disorder can be difficult.

It is normal for people to:

- Feel worried about the person
- Find it hard to know how to talk to them
- Find it difficult to know how to deal with mood changes
- Feel powerless, frustrated and angry
- Feel stress and anxiety
- Have financial problems if a family member has to take time off work to care for the individual



LO4: Content and Assessment criteria

4.1. Describe the treatments for the different types of eating disorders

4.2. Outline two organisations available to help with the management and support of eating disorders



Anorexia nervosa

- Anorexia nervosa can be treated in outpatient facilities, however if the condition becomes worse, the risk to physical health increases and treatment in inpatient units may be required
- A GP could also refer an individual to the following:
 - Psychiatrist
 - Psychologist
 - Nurse
 - Dietician
 - Paediatrician (in cases of children and teenagers)



Anorexia nervosa

- Talking therapies that encourage healthy eating habits and reduce the risk to physical and mental well-being, e.g.
 - Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)
 - Cognitive Analytic Therapy (CAT)
 - Interpersonal therapy (IPT)
 - Family intervention therapy
- Self-help and support groups – talking to others going through similar experiences can be useful to both sufferers and their families throughout treatment and in sustaining recovery



Bulimia nervosa

Initially people suffering from bulimia nervosa may be offered a guided self-help program in conjunction with a health care professional.

- This can relate to:
 - Learning to deal with triggers
 - Monitoring eating patterns
 - Working with the causes of the disorder
 - Coping with feelings associated with the disorder
- Medication – medication may be offered as part of a combination therapy with self-help treatment
- People with bulimia may be admitted to hospital if they begin to show signs of serious complications



Binge eating disorders

- The recommended treatments for binge eating disorder are mainly based on cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)
- The National Institute of Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recommends guided self-help focused specifically on binge eating disorder as the first step
- NICE guidelines state that weight loss is not the intended goal of the therapies recommended to treat binge eating disorder
- Self-help and support groups may be useful, to both sufferers and their families, to talk to others going through similar experiences throughout treatment and in sustaining recovery



Organisations available to help with the management of eating disorders

- **Mind** – information on eating problems, including possible causes, symptoms and how to access treatment and support. Includes self-care tips for helping yourself, plus guidance for friends and family
 - <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/eating-problems/about-eating-problems/>
- **National Institute of Mental health** – brochures and factsheets on eating disorders
 - <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/eating-disorders/index.sht>
- **Beat: eating disorders** – information, support and guidance on eating disorders
 - <https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/>





Learning check

- What treatments are recommended for binge eating disorders?
- **List two** treatments used in the management of bulimia nervosa
- **List three** medical professionals to whom a GP may refer someone with anorexia nervosa
- **List four** long term effects of anorexia nervosa on the individual
- **List three** factors associated with the development of bulimia nervosa
- **Outline three** social risk factors for developing eating disorders
- **Identify three** behavioural, psychological and physical signs of anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorders

