

Eating Disorders (Anorexia, Bulimia, Binge Eating)

Description of the Disability

There are three major types of eating disorders: anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorder. These are serious psychological disorders with physical implications that can result in death. The vast majority of people with anorexia and bulimia are women, especially women in their teens and early twenties. Even with treatment, most of these individuals will only make a partial recovery, and relapses are common.

Anorexia and Bulimia result from a distorted body image, particularly the constant feeling of being overweight regardless of their actual appearance or weight.

Anorexia Nervosa is characterized by excessive dieting which results in a failure to maintain a minimal normal body weight. Anorexia means “lack of appetite”, but these individuals are actually hungry and preoccupied with food. Research suggests the disorder crosses all socioeconomic and cultural lines, but it is especially common among college women. Often these individuals are meticulous, compulsive and have very high standards for achievement. Possible consequences include:

- Kidney and liver damage
- Fatigue/Lack of energy
- Dizziness and headaches
- Shortness of breath
- Cold hands and feet
- Bloating/Constipation/Stomach pains
- Edema (water retention)
- Insomnia
- Depression
- Low self-esteem
- Strength
- Heart proble

Bulimia Nervosa is characterized by a cycle of binge eating followed by “purging” the body of the unwanted calories. Purging methods involve vomiting and laxative abuse. It can also include excessive exercise, fasting or use of diuretics, diet pills and enemas. Possible consequences include

- Fatigue/Lack of energy
- Dizziness and headaches
- Constipation and diarrhea
- Depression
- Low self-esteem
- Erosion of teeth enamel (from repeated exposure to stomach acid during vomiting)
- Kidney and liver damage
- Edema (swelling of hands/feet)
- Abrasions on hands/knuckles
- Muscle weakness

- Heart problems

Binge Eating Disorder (Compulsive Overeating) involves bingeing on food without purging afterwards, causing significant weight gain. These individuals often use consumption of food as a way to cope with stress and daily problems. They usually feel out of control and know their eating patterns are abnormal. Possible consequences include:

- Fatigue
- Low self-esteem
- Mobility problems (from weight gain)
- Arthritis (from weight gain)
- Varicose veins
- Sleep deprivation
- Diabetes
- Heart problems

Incidence Statistics

- 90% of cases of anorexia and bulimia are women.
- 1% of female adolescents have anorexia.
- Approximately 4% of college-aged women have anorexia.
- Even with treatment, only 20% of individuals with eating disorders make a complete recovery.

Common Treatments, Medications, and Side Effects

Treatment for eating disorders includes restoring the person's body weight to one typical for them, psychotherapy, family therapy, and antidepressant drugs. Antidepressants such as Prozac, Paxil, and Zoloft are sometimes used (see drug entry on SSRIs for side effects).

Persons with eating disorders may also be taking medication for coexisting impairments such as obsessive-compulsive disorder, depression or anxiety. (See entry on Mood Disorders)

Possible Functional Issues

- Fatigue, reduced stamina
- Dizziness and headaches
- Shortness of breath
- Daytime sleepiness
- Functional issues associated with depression
- Reduced strength

Initial Interview Considerations

Initial Questions

- What effect has the disorder had on their work?
- What kind of trouble do they have with fatigue or sleepiness during the day?
- What medications are they taking if any? Are there any side effects?
- How would they feel about a job meeting the public? Would they rather avoid that or is it OK?
- Would they prefer to work with a group of people or to work alone?
- How would they feel about a work environment where food was present, such a place where people frequently brought snacks in for others? What kinds of problems do they think that would cause for them?

Initial Observations

- How does the person's strength appear to be? Are they frail looking or robust?
- How good do their social skills appear to be? Do they seem to be depressed or shy?

Interview Accommodations (if any)

- Do not have snacks or candy out in plain view. It could distract the person.

Possible Accommodations and Assistive Technology

Watch minder: A specialized watch with an alarm set for certain intervals in the day to remind the person to eat.

Career Planning Issues

- Stamina and strength issues may require a job with light physical activity.
- Environments with unhealthy food available (snacks and treats brought in by co-workers, snack machines) may be a challenge for the individual and need to be discussed.
- They may or may not have feelings about meeting the public based on their body image. This may also effect their preference for working in groups or alone.
- Support groups are available, especially on college campuses and online.

Emerging Issues

- Awareness
- Treatment, prevention
- Societal attention to weight and appearance

Additional Information Resources

- Something Fishy website on eating disorders: www.something-fishy.org
- Anorexia Nervosa and Related Eating Disorders, Inc (ANRED): www.anred.com