

Eating Issues and Finding Help

Why the term ‘eating difficulties’?

EDEN uses the term eating difficulties to refer to a wide range of women’s and men’s body and eating experiences and practices. This includes the clinically defined eating disorders anorexia and bulimia as well as issues such as eating past fullness, excessive exercising, restricting, purging, body dissatisfaction and yo-yo dieting.

EDEN believes it is useful to view all eating and body image issues as a reflection of the anxiety which food and body size hold for many people in societies where being thin is idealised and being fat is abhorred. The severity or extent of these problems can be influenced by gendered expectations, family experiences, a background of abuse, major life stressors, unrealistic pressures to achieve, developmental or life-stage challenges (e.g., puberty, pregnancy, menopause) and disruption to normal eating patterns.

If you or someone you care about is struggling with any kind of eating or body image difficulty and you don’t know what to do you are welcome to contact us.



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How to recognise an eating issue



With an eating or body image issue your loved one may:

- ◆ Feel out of control around food
- ◆ Feel nervous and guilty about eating
- ◆ Find themselves continually on a diet
- ◆ Find themselves constantly thinking about eating or not eating
- ◆ Eat according to a set of rules that they have created and not according to when they feel hungry
- ◆ Attempt to get rid of food by vomiting or taking laxatives
- ◆ Starve themselves for periods of time
- ◆ Use weight loss medications and supplements inappropriately
- ◆ Exercise excessively
- ◆ Feel compelled to exercise even if they are tired, unwell, injured
- ◆ Binge on food followed by feelings of anxiety, guilt or self-disgust
- ◆ Not be able to eat until they have exercised
- ◆ Feel that their body is never quite 'right'
- ◆ Feel terrified of gaining weight
- ◆ Believe that everything would be alright if only they had the 'ideal' figure.

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Is it Time for your loved one to get Help?

Ask your loved one to consider their responses to these questions:

- ❖ Is this a problem for me a lot of the time?
- ❖ What changes have I noticed lately?
- ❖ Does this stop me from doing the things I would otherwise do?
- ❖ Does it cause me to feel bad about myself or put myself down?
- ❖ Do I feel unable to talk to anyone about this?
- ❖ Do I feel ashamed of this?
- ❖ Does this isolate me from other people?
- ❖ Does it diminish my quality of life?

If the answer is “yes” to one or more of these questions it may be time to seek help.



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Services and Resources at EDEN



- ✧ Resource centre and library
- ✧ Individual counselling services
- ✧ Training and Workshops
- ✧ Referral services
- ✧ Services for schools
- ✧ Support groups
- ✧ Newsletter
- ✧ Community events
- ✧ Community education
- ✧ Advocacy

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Frequently Asked Questions



1) What Are Eating and Body Image Issues?

EDEN uses the term eating difficulties to refer to a wide continuum of women's (and men's) experience. It can include a preoccupation with food, yo-yo dieting, body image dissatisfaction, self induced starvation and vomiting, laxative abuse, eating past fullness, steroid abuse, and excessive exercising (among others). Included in this continuum are the eating disorders anorexia and bulimia. We believe it is useful to view these disorders as an extreme reflection of the anxiety which food and body size holds for many women, and increasingly men, in westernized societies.

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2) What Causes Eating and Body Image Issues?

A pervasive feature of westernized societies is the ideal of extreme thinness for women and toned muscularity for men. The pressure to achieve these ideals can cause people to focus on their body size and shape as a source of identity and self esteem. This engages many in a struggle with food, unhealthy weight management practices, a distorted body image, fears about their health and depression. A history of dieting or restricted eating is a common factor in the development of eating difficulties, and has become an accepted part of 'normal' behaviour. However there is no single factor responsible for a person developing an eating difficulty and indeed there is much debate about their origins and nature. However, we do know that dieting often precipitates the development of eating issues along with other factors such as: social pressure to be thin, low self esteem, unrealistically high expectations of self, stress, major life changes and experiences of abuse. Eating difficulties can feel like a solution and means of coping with emotional issues, stress and anxiety.



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3) Is it Possible to Recover From an Eating Issue?

Yes. Working through the issues that underlie eating difficulties can lead to acceptance and celebration of ourselves and a nourishing relationship with food. It is important to remember that recovering from an eating issue is not just a return to normal weight and is not necessarily a linear or straightforward process. Just as eating issues develop for a whole range of reasons, pathways to healing and wellbeing are similarly diverse. It is critical to find support that feels right for you (see seeking help).

4) What is Body Mass Index (BMI)?

BMI is just a number. It is not an indication of health. Rather, it is a crude calculation of an individual's weight to height ratio that does not take into account important factors such as age, gendered fat distribution, ethnicity, socio-economic status, dieting history, access to medical care, experiences of discrimination, genetics, smoking history, disease status, and fitness level. BMI figures are used to label underweight, overweight and obesity and to reinforce ideas and prescriptions about dieting and weight management (which overlap with existing negative Western cultural values about fat).



5) What is a Healthy Weight?

‘Healthy weight’ is not a very useful term because health is not determined by weight. Health is a holistic concept determined by numerous factors including mental, emotional, spiritual and physical wellbeing. In terms of the latter, eating a wide variety of foods and living actively contribute to good health but are not its sole determinants. EDEN considers a healthy weight to be the weight that a person naturally settles at when they are eating a range of nutritious and delicious foods and exercising in enjoyable and sustainable ways (without focusing on weight control). It is also really important to find ways to appreciate and accept our bodies and the natural diversity of body sizes in general. If you live in this way, you may or may not achieve an ‘ideal’ weight but you will be at the weight that is right for you and you will most definitely improve your health and feel better about yourself.



6) Is it ok to Comment on People’s Weight?

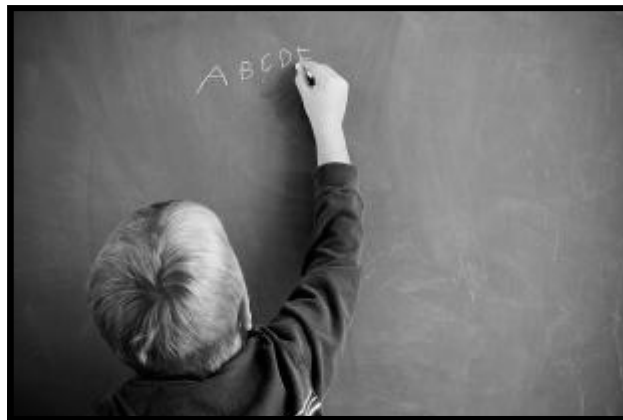
Commenting about weight and size and evaluating others’ appearance is inappropriate in any context. Conversations that focus on appearance (our own, others, or those in the media) leave an impression on the people around us. Even comments that we assume to be complimentary reinforce and reproduce restrictive body ideals and can produce self-consciousness (e.g., “you look great, have you lost weight?”, “that outfit is really slimming on you”, “you look better, have you gained a few pounds?”).

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7) How do I Control my Child's Food Intake?

This issue can cause a lot of anxiety for parents. Children from a young age need to be trusted, not controlled or forced around eating. If children are not over-managed they will eat instinctively in a way that is right for them using their internal cues of hunger, appetite and sense of fullness. EDEN believes that fostering the development of this body trust in children from birth is optimal. However, in the current climate of fear and restriction around food, developing our own body trust can be challenging enough, and trusting our children seems impossible. The basis or first step of developing body trust with children involves parents being responsible for presenting a range of wholesome, appealing foods at predictable times and leaving children to decide what and how much they want to eat. It can be helpful to remember that children (and adults) meet their nutritional needs (i.e. cover all the food groups) over a number of days rather than needing to eat a 'balanced' meal, every meal.



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8) My Child is Being Bullied About Their Weight/Body/ Appearance - What Can I do?

It is important to take bullying and weight teasing seriously. These can contribute to problems with self esteem and body satisfaction and has been shown to lead to dieting and disturbed eating patterns. Report teasing and encourage your child's school (or club) to develop policies around weight harassment. Let your child know that bullying is not acceptable and is not an indicator of some individual failing on their behalf. Do not advocate dieting as a solution. Link respect for size diversity with respect for diversity in ethnicity, intelligence, sexuality, religion etc. Provide opportunities for your child to talk about their experiences with you or another trusted adult.



Support for Individuals

There are several options for supporting and resourcing yourself as you face your eating issue. These include (but are not restricted to) attending support groups, seeing a counsellor, reading helpful literature, becoming active in your community around issues of size and weight, doing activities that you love, having supportive conversations, reaching out to others and reducing your sense of isolation.



Many individuals find it difficult to tell somebody what they are going through.

If this is you:

- ★ Consider who you have a trusting and respectful relationship with
- ★ Make a time to meet with that person in a safe place to discuss your concerns
- ★ Explain the feelings and behaviors that have become a part of your life
- ★ Ask the person if they would be willing to support you in seeking help

Many people find counselling helpful for addressing their eating issues. An important part of counselling for body image and eating difficulties from an EDEN perspective includes developing body trust.

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The ways EDEN would look at developing body trust would be to:

- investigate the origins and nature of eating issues and body image dissatisfaction
- look at the role of hunger in our lives and our abilities to meet our many hungers (emotional, spiritual, psychological, physical)
- reflect on our current relationship with food and body image
- find ways to learn to eat in response to hunger and to stop eating when we are full
- find ways to free ourselves from our food and body difficulties
- find ways to celebrate ourselves as we are now
- Consider, reflect and draw upon our resources, strengths and competencies



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EDEN considers the following to be important within a counselling relationship:

- ★ non-pathologising approaches to the whole range of eating and body image difficulties.
- ★ holistic definitions of health and wellbeing that are not related to size, weight and shape.
- ★ locating eating and body image difficulties within the socio-cultural context within which they arise.
- ★ clients feeling validated in their counselling relationships. We consider that your own knowledge and understandings around your eating and body image issues and experiences should be central to the counselling process.

EDEN offers counselling and support for those living with an eating difficulty/ disorder and their loved ones. If you would like to talk to us about our counselling service, please do not hesitate to call us on (09) 378 9039 x2, email us at: info@eden.org.nz or check out our website at: www.eden.org.nz.



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Guidelines for friends, family and significant others supporting a loved one with an eating difficulty

Most parents, friends and family members will not be faced with the challenges of understanding and supporting someone with anorexia or bulimia. Many however will face the challenge of loved ones who have body image concerns and who engage in restrictive and/or binge eating. It is important to remember that eating issues and body image dissatisfaction can later develop into eating disorders in some people.

The following pages provide some ideas on ways to support a loved one who may currently be experiencing eating or body image difficulties. Your responses may be quite different depending on whether the person you are concerned about is an adult or a child. If you have immediate health concerns (e.g. notice rapid weight loss, changed eating habits, extreme dieting, over-exercising) about someone and/or are responsible for the care of a child, then seek advice from a health professional urgently.



Please note: when talking and thinking about your loved one and the eating difficulty they are struggling with, try to view the problem as the problem, rather than the person as the problem.

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Have empathy and understanding

Expressing empathy and understanding about the difficult position your loved one is in, is a very important first step. Asking for help is often one of the hardest things that those who are struggling with eating difficulties have to do.

Express concern about your observations: Speak from your own experience

Try to stay calm and keep to specific examples. Keep away from only discussing food, weight, exercise or other related topics. Try to use 'I' statements when talking about the concerns you are holding for your loved one.

Eg: Instead of saying "I think you've got Bulimia", try "I heard what sounded like you throwing up in the bathroom last night, and I'm worried about your health".

Provide information about resources for help and support

It can be helpful to have some information about possible avenues of help and support, as your loved one might be open to this when you talk with them. If you feel able, offer to go with them to at least one appointment for support.



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Be prepared to be rebuffed

When approached about the concerns you are holding, the person who is struggling with an eating difficulty may argue, deny that there is a problem and/or get angry. Stick to your feelings and give voice to the hope that your loved one will get help.

Accept your limitations

Remember that there is a limit to what you can do for another person. Having said this, there is still a lot you can do to be supportive.

Be patient – there are no quick solutions

Leaving an eating difficulty behind can take a long time and changes are not only weight/symptom focussed. Anyone attempting to take their life back from an eating difficulty will have good days and not so good days. Try to look at the bigger picture and support all steps – particularly those that might seem to you to be small. Every step into life is to be celebrated.



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Move away from blaming or demanding

Trying to find someone or something to blame for the eating difficulty your loved one is suffering from will not be helpful. It also may invoke feelings of guilt and shame for your loved one. Try not to focus only on the problems, instead look at possible ways forward.

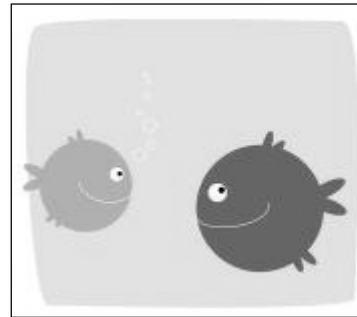
Ask a professional about how to be of support

There is a chance that the person who is living with an eating difficulty will not be sure what would be helpful. In other cases, what your loved one may think will be helpful, could potentially make things worse. Talk with a counsellor or other professional about ways that you could be of support.

Deal with the feelings of all family members

It is important at this point to remember that everyone in the family is impacted in some way when someone they love is living with an eating difficulty.

Make sure there is opportunity for everyone to be included in any plans made. Friends, family members and/or flatmates can also be of great support on a day-to-day level.



Show affection and appreciation

There are many ways to show care and support for your loved one; including talking, hugging, spending time together doing things you enjoy. If conversation seems difficult, writing letters or notes can help to convey this affection and appreciation.



Do not comment on weight or appearance

Try to move the focus away from what a person looks like.

Commenting on weight and appearance – including your own – can strengthen the hold the eating difficulty has on an individual's thoughts and actions. If your loved one asks you about their weight, gently steer the conversation in another direction. Try responses such as; “There is no answer that I can give here that will be helpful, so why don't we talk about something else”.

Do not use bribes, rewards or punishments to control eating behaviour

This is a very easy trap to fall into. However, trying to control an individual's eating difficulty through bribery, rewards, punishments or coercion will not be helpful in the long term.

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Try not to over-scrutinize behaviour, even when asked

It is sometimes suggested that family members or partners act in ways that closely scrutinize the behaviour or actions of an individual who is living with an eating difficulty. By watching when your loved one eats or patrolling the bathroom, the control that the eating difficulty is wielding over her/him, will only be shifted to yourself; and this will not last for long, if at all. Try to keep away from this level of intense scrutiny, as by doing so, the relationship that you share may be compromised.

Having said this, family involvement can play a very important role in supporting a loved one's shift away from an eating difficulty. Try to talk about the eating difficulty in ways that discuss the problem itself, rather than positioning the person as the problem. Again, seek professional advice and support for both yourself and your loved one in this instance.



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Seek help and support for yourself

Watching a loved one suffer with an eating difficulty can be very difficult. It is important to seek information, help and support for yourself also. Reading about eating difficulties, talking with trusted friends and acknowledging the painful, frustrating and confusing feelings you are experiencing can be helpful. It is also vital that you take care of yourself during this time. If you think it might be useful, do not hesitate to gain professional help and support for yourself.



Adapted from:
Costin, C. (2007) *The Eating Disorder Sourcebook: Third Edition*. McGraw Hill: USA. pp85 – 97.

Recommended Reading

Maisel, R., Epston, D. & Borden, A. (2004) *Biting the hand that starves you*. New York: W.W.Norton.

McMillan, K. (2006) *Feast or Famine: A New Zealand Guide to Understanding Eating Disorders*. New Zealand: Random House

Pipher, M. (1996) *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the selves of adolescent girls* Auckland: Doubleday

Richardson, B.L. & Rehr, E. (2001) *101 Ways to Help You Daughter Love Her Body* USA: HarperCollins

Treasure, J. (1997) *Anorexia nervosa: A survival guide for families, friends and sufferers* New York: Brunner-Routledge

Siegel, M., Brisman, J., & Weinshel, M.S.W. (1997) *Surviving an Eating Disorder: Strategies for Family and Friends: Revised and Updated* New York:HarperCollins Publishers

Smith, G. (2004) *Anorexia and Bulimia in the Family: one parent's practical guide to recovery* West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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