



Eating Disorders - Symptoms of Distress

Part 4

Men and
Eating Disorders

***Norfolk Eating
Disorders Association***

Men and Eating Disorders

The more people learn about eating disorders, the more they realise that these illnesses affect people of any age, gender, ethnic or economic group.

Men and boys are not immune to developing anorexia, bulimia and compulsive eating.

A generally accepted statistic is that 10% of eating disorder sufferers are men, but this proportion depends very much on the age of the sufferer, the illness concerned, and other factors involved. For example, the ratio of sufferers is said to be higher than 10% in boys under the age of 14 years, the gay community, and in men who have unresolved issues around their sexuality. It may also be higher in men involved in the media, dance, drama and sport. And the proportion of men struggling with compulsive eating is unknown, but may be higher than 10% of the total.

So why do men get eating disorders?

As far as anyone can tell, men get eating disorders for much the same reasons that women do. This means that they are just as affected by a combination of inherited characteristics, family circumstances, life experiences and social and peer pressures.

On the whole, eating disorders for men as well as for women tend to arise around issues concerning power and powerlessness, and become focused on image, weight and shape.

For example, weight loss may be seen as the route to becoming like the latest successful icon - complete with six-pack, oiled, and probably tanned (despite this no

I've always been big. As a child I remember being one of the "fatties" at school. I think I really knew that I was gay when I was about 8, not that I understood what it was all about, but I knew I was different. Being fat and being gay don't go well together, at least, not when you're a man.

I've moved away from home to make it easier for everyone – although my family have been great and accept me as I am. I'm not saying I haven't had relationships – I have, but they don't last long and I'm sure that's because of my weight.

It isn't easy, trying to fit into the gay scene. I walk into a pub and it goes quiet, briefly. I know I'm being assessed and rejected because I'm fat. I can see it in their eyes. If women feel under pressure to be thin, that's nothing to the pressure I feel. Most of the guys do body building because you've got to have a good body. Preferably, you need to be young, and it helps if you're pretty, but most of all you've got to be thin. None of that is me.

I love my job, which helps, but outside that I go home to see my family a lot or I'd go mad. But that means less time for trying to build up a group of real friends – so it's a vicious circle. It's just very lonely. So I eat.

longer being politically correct) Muscle is important, but so is slimness, for men as well as women.

Whatever the situation, fat is not, in western society, openly seen as desirable. This is true despite, or because of, the current rise in obesity in the population as a whole. One common thread through all the problems is self-hatred applied to body size and shape.

"The Full Monty" contained a telling, and quite feasible sequence, involving cling-film and Mars bars, about the sort of desperate and illogical states people - men as well as women - can get into about their weight and eating.

For many people, men especially, the way into an eating disorder may be via sport, exercise, body-building or "healthy living." These are socially acceptable directions towards which men and women can channel their energy, and socially approved ways for everyone to eat and aim to live.

However, the focus is **still** on body shape and weight, and achievement. This means that these are all potential danger areas for eating problems when they become obsessive.

Sports like boxing and horse riding, where weight is a qualifying standard, include men who have anorexia or bulimia, or who have died from the effects of too-quick weight loss.

Unbalanced eating can lead to physical and mental problems even when it is labelled "healthy" or builds strong muscles.

James was a sales manager, aged forty-four, married with two children. The influx of a new breed of younger, computer-literate managers and falling sales made him feel that, somewhere along the line, he was failing. The talk at work revolved around weight training, pulling the birds and "Last night at the club..." His wife enrolled at the local health club, so he went along too, and soon began to go in every night on his way home from work. At weekends he was really ratty if he couldn't get to the health club, and started to "watch his diet" instead.

James had been anorexic while at school. It started the year he did badly in his exams, but was picked for the athletics team. He felt he had let his parents down. Time spent in training helped him run better, and got him away from their concern - or nagging. As he trained he lost weight and, as he trained, he ran better. The more miserable he got, the more he saw losing weight as the thing that was helping him to improve his performance. He started to cut back on what he ate and drank, and the coach failed to pick up what was happening. When a new coach realised what had been going on, eventually, things began to get sorted out. His current crisis pitched him straight back into the exercise and eating pattern he had used to block out his problems when he was younger.

A remark from one of the children a couple of months later alerted his wife to the changes that had gradually come over James. She was shocked to realise how much weight he had lost, how withdrawn from them all he had become and how bitterly unhappy he was at work. When she challenged him he got angry, then began to cry. Feeling in shock, she managed to dial the Norfolk EDA helpline and talk about the situation through her tears.

And men are still expected to be "strong" and in charge of every situation. This includes not crying (of course), not needing to take a lunch break, being willing and able to work all hours, to maintain a relationship **and** their freedom at the same time.

Many men feel under pressure from their peers to drink vast quantities of alcohol, eat fast food, live a nightlife as well as function during the day, **and** to watch their weight and appearance.

All this can add up to too much stress at times of life crisis - job loss, bullying, marriage, divorce, birth of a child, bereavement, abuse.

These can all be situations that lead you to not liking yourself very much. You may feel a failure or out of control of your life - utterly miserable, angry, self-hating and powerless.

Such feelings are hard for anyone to handle - and one of the things that may **appear** to help is the way you use food.

However, one of the things that may **really** help is for you to know that you are not alone. Other people feel the same way - even other men, however together they may seem to be.

These feelings and situations won't last forever. Being stuck in misusing food needn't last forever either. Getting free from an eating disorder with all its aspects is a long process, but it is possible. You can find ways to cope and make you feel better that don't revolve around weight and food.

What is life like with an eating disorder?

If you have read any of our other publications, you will realise that life is pretty much the same for men with eating problems as it is for women. Check it out in one of our other booklets.

Eating disorders can be particularly isolating illnesses for men. Being part of a minority group (a male) **within** a minority group (of people with eating disorders) - struggling with what are generally seen as "women's problems" - is no fun. Self-hatred and feelings of shame and guilt intensify when brought up against the expected masculine image. The trucker compulsively eating loads of chocolate, fried breakfasts, biscuits, cakes, drinking carbonated drinks, a loner roaming the motorways, may be crying inside at the extra weight that he is piling on - but who could he tell?

Bulimia is also very isolating. Bingeing and vomiting may be part of the social pattern for many young men as they go the rounds of the pubs and clubs. **However**, the secrecy and shame that surrounds the bulimic habit for both men and women is not part of the fashionable social scene. Throwing up with a group of mates is one thing. Admitting that you do the same every day or night when you are alone, and feeling total panic and absolutely worthless when you do, is something else.

Cowering at home, afraid to go out because you feel that people are staring at you all the time, is an isolating experience shared by both men and women with **anorexia**. People may stare, but you think it's because you look like a beached whale, when what they are actually seeing is someone who is desperately thin and ill.

Just as what lies behind the illnesses have common threads, the signs and symptoms for eating disorders are much the same for men as they are for women.

Hormonal changes are less easy to observe, but testosterone levels will be low when at low weight, usually returning to normal with weight restoration. However, if restrictive, low-weight anorexia goes on for a long time at a key growth stage, the reproductive organs may not recover and infertility may result. In a man, the testes shrink, and sperm production suffers, and there may be a significant loss of libido. Men can also suffer osteoporosis as a long-term effect of anorexia.

When you have an eating disorder you hate yourself and expect everyone else to hate you too. What others see as success in your life you view as total failure if it is anything less than perfect.

You feel a weakling every time food passes your lips - in either direction. The whole of life revolves around food because allowing it to do so is less painful than looking at what lies behind the mask you show to the world.

Those you love will worry about what they see as the strength of your determination or desperation to control. This may be at a time when you are feeling at your very weakest. They see you diminishing or expanding before their eyes. **They** may feel powerless to do anything to help at a time when **you** are using food because you feel powerless over what has happened or is happening in your life.

So, life with an eating disorder is often lived at a roller coaster of extremes. It can be lonely and frightening for all involved.

*So, are **you** burying all the stresses and strains of your life in what you do with food? If so, what effect is an eating disorder having on you and your life? What can you do about it? and how can you guard against eating problems striking again?*

What can you do about it?

The first effective step towards change is to accept that you have a problem. Putting out feelers towards a source of help would be ideal, but many people feel too ashamed and/or proud to do so. It is not necessary to "go it alone." It is not shameful to ask for help.

Ending the isolation can be the start of limiting the power the illness has over you. Most of the pointers towards recovery in our booklet about Recovery would be enlightening for men as well as women.

The question:

“How can I guard against eating problems striking again?” is usually best answered through a combination of sorting out what is behind the eating problems, discovering who you are, what you want out of life, and building on the strengths you have inside you.

Taking a real responsibility and control over your life may involve making choices that change your priorities in life. It will probably mean taking a long, hard, look at the society in which you live, and challenging what you have found to be damaging attitudes. Norfolk EDA could help you to make a start.

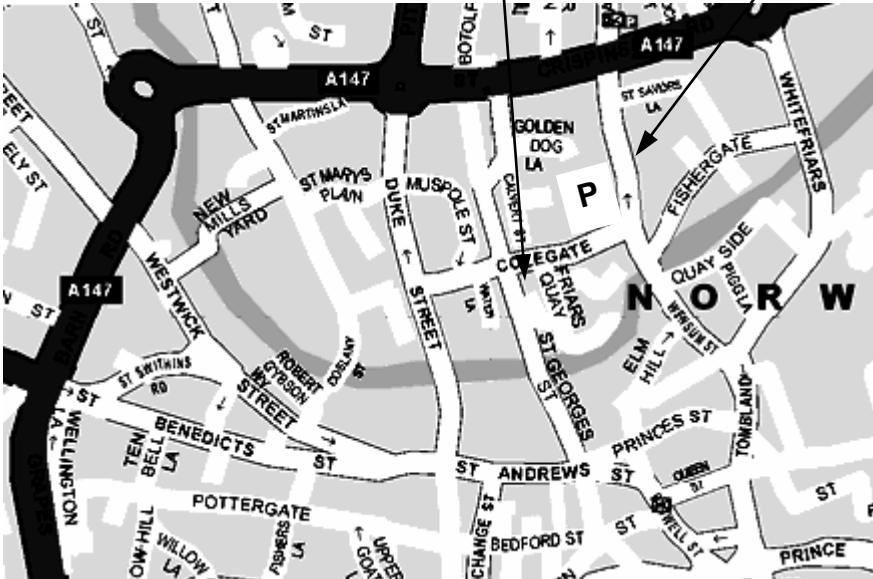
Norfolk EDA Publications

- ◆ **1: Anorexia & Bulimia nervosa, Compulsive or Binge Eating. Disorder & the Grey Area**
Also includes Norfolk statistics and influence of the media.
- ◆ **2: Strategies for Recovery**
This is intended for people who want to work to control or overcome their eating disorder, but need some help or support at hand. May also be helpful for carers.
- ◆ **3: Help for Carers**
Especially for families, friends, colleagues and employers of people with eating disorders, offering practical help and support.
- ◆ **4: Men and Eating Disorders**
So much information is aimed specifically at women, men often feel it is irrelevant to them. This begins to redress the balance.
- ◆ **5: Eating Disorders and Pregnancy**
Issues around fertility and pregnancy are often problem areas for women with eating disorders. This booklet looks at some of these issues.
- ◆ **6: Eating Disorders - Information for Young People**
Adapted from our original schools hand-out, this is aimed at young people over the age of 16 years.
- ◆ **Supported Self-help Group Programme**
Available quarterly.
- ◆ **General Information Leaflet**
About Norfolk EDA services: group meetings, 1:1 appointments, outreach services and counselling

To request copies of our booklets contact 01603-665974 (admin)

Norfolk Eating Disorders Association
34 Colegate, Norwich NR3 1BG
website - www.norfolkeda.org.uk
email - support@norfolkeda.org.uk;
admin@norfolkeda.org.uk

(off Magdalen Street)



HELPLINE
01603 767062

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