

Eating Disorder Facts and Definitions

Eating disorders affect millions of men and women of all ages, races, sexual orientations, geographic locations, socioeconomic levels, and religions. These illnesses do not discriminate! Eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of ALL mental health diagnoses, and numerous physical complications can develop from an eating disorder.

While the specific causes of eating disorders are not yet known, we do know that they are triggered by a unique combination of biological, psychological, social, and relational conditions. In fact, current research suggests that eating disorders are about 40% genetic and 60% environmental, meaning that a person is probably born with a genetic predisposition to develop the disorder, and some environmental stressor triggers this genetic tendency. Families usually are not to blame for these illnesses; in fact, they often are key components in effectively treating these deadly illnesses.

In May 2013, the American Psychiatric Association revised the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), thus changing the diagnostic criteria for the various eating disorders. The following information outlines the current types of eating disorders and their diagnostic criteria:

Types of Eating Disorders

Anorexia Nervosa: This diagnosis is defined by (1) a restriction of energy intake leading to a significantly low body weight in the context of age, sex, developmental trajectory, and physical health; (2) an intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat, or persistent behavior that interferes with weight gain; and (3) disturbed body image, undue influence of body weight or shape on self-evaluation, or persistent lack of recognition of the seriousness of the current low body weight. People who meet these criteria may either restrict by not consuming enough calories each day (restricting type), or they may binge and purge during the current episode of anorexia (binge-eating/purging type).

Bulimia Nervosa: This diagnosis is defined by (1) eating a large amount of food in a discrete period of time and feeling out of control while eating; and (2) inappropriate compensatory behaviors to prevent weight gain (e.g., self-induced vomiting, misuse of laxatives, diuretics, fasting, excessive exercise); (3) binge eating and inappropriate compensatory behaviors both occur at least once a week for 3 months; and (4) self-evaluation is unduly influenced by body shape and weight.

Binge-Eating Disorder: This diagnosis is defined by (1) binge eating that is associated three or more of the following (a) eating much more rapidly than normal, (b) eating until feeling uncomfortably full, (c) eating large amounts of food when not feeling physically hungry, (d) eating alone because of feeling embarrassed by how much one is eating, (e) feeling disgusted with oneself, depressed, or very guilty afterward; (2) marked distress regarding binge eating; and (3) binge eating occurs at least once a week for 3 months.

Other Specified Eating Disorder: This diagnosis is reserved for sub-clinical eating disorders, in which the disorder causes clinically significant distress or impairment but does not meet the full criteria for one of the disorders listed above. Examples of "other" eating disorders include:

- Atypical anorexia nervosa, in which an individual's weight is within or above the normal range
- Bulimia nervosa of low frequency or limited duration
- Binge-eating disorder of low frequency or limited duration
- Purging disorder, in which recurrent purging behavior to influence weight or shape occurs in the absence of binge eating
- Night eating syndrome, in which eating occurs after awakening from sleep or by excessive food consumption after the evening meal.

Unspecified Eating Disorder: This diagnosis captures any type of eating disorder that causes clinically significant distress or impairment but does not meet the criteria for any of the eating disorders listed above. Some of the disordered behaviors that fall into this category include:

- Orthorexia: an unhealthy obsession with "health" foods; avoidance of foods that are non-organic and/or may contain sugar, animal products, white flour, fat, or preservatives
- Diabulimia: a person with Type 1 diabetes who purposefully skips or decreases their insulin in an effort to lose weight
- Pregorexia: a slang term that describes a pregnant woman who reduces her caloric intake so as to avoid healthy weight gain during her pregnancy
- Drunkorexia: a slang term that describes severe restricting of food to compensate for the calories consumed from binge drinking; also refers to bingeing on alcohol and then purging