

# From me and my friends to you and yours...Anorexia (Ah-no-rex-ee-ah)

## What is anorexia?

Anorexia is an eating disorder that is characterised by weight loss, difficulties maintaining healthy body weight and/or restriction in the amount/type of food consumed. It may also involve excessive exercise, purging by vomiting and use of laxatives in an attempt to control weight. The reason for this is often due to a distorted perception in how the sufferer perceives themselves (a major part of the illness which becomes worse if not treated early), believing that their body is larger than it actually is. This can become a challenge as they may develop a fear of gaining weight and will challenge any notion from others that they should.

Currently in the U.K. around 1.25 million people are receiving treatment for either anorexia or bulimia, with around 75% being female. It is important to note however that eating disorders do not discriminate and can affect any gender, race or age group.

Due to the condition resulting in malnutrition, anorexia can have serious health consequences and has the highest death rate of any mental illness (20% of those diagnosed). Severe food deprivation can result in the body shutting down leading to cardiovascular problems, hormonal issues and an increased risk of bone fractures. However, while the consequences can be fatal, with the right treatment and support, recovery is possible.

## How it affects me

### Physically

In the seven months since I have been diagnosed with anorexia, the condition has had a significant impact on me physically. Weight loss has led to malnutrition and deficiencies in important vitamins and minerals such as calcium and iron which I now have to have monitored regularly. As a keen runner I am now no longer able to pursue the sport I enjoy right now due to a loss of physical fitness and a greater risk of osteoporosis. Furthermore, a low heart rate indicates a loss of muscle in the heart,

which has led to poorer circulation and can cause me to feel cold even under 'normal' temperatures.

## Mentally

Anorexia has also significantly affected me mentally, as a lower food intake often leads to fatigue. When I was experiencing the condition at its worst, I struggled to get through a typical day at University or work due to constantly feeling tired and finding difficulties with concentrating. The condition itself is also mentally exhausting, as I often find myself feeling stressed and anxious about food at all times of the day, not just during meal times. A combination of the fatigue and anxiety has consequently led to me often feeling isolated due to avoiding social situations and a loss of interest in things that I was passionate about previously.

One of the worst side effects of the disease however is that it leads you to believe that you do not have an eating disorder, and so you do not need to seek help. This can be extremely dangerous, as even when at my lowest weight, I believed that I wasn't "sick enough" to receive treatment despite medical professionals expressing concern about my health.

## Life in general

When I was initially diagnosed, I had many appointments and consultations with ED services that would often clash with my daily routine. Now, I have recently been hospitalised, which has had a huge impact on both myself and my family. This involves constant observation from nurses, regular tests and a strict meal plan that I have to follow.

Not only this but over the past few months I have had to stop doing the things that I enjoy such as running, driving and working. However, I am now using this as motivation to recover and free myself from rigid food rules.

## How a friend can help

The most important thing I think a friend can do to help is be kind and supportive. There is a lot of stigma/misunderstanding surrounding eating disorders, as many forget that they are mental illnesses and not a diet/phase. Language can also be very triggering, and so it is best to avoid talking about anything related to dieting, eating or exercise as this can bring about negative ED thoughts and behaviours. This includes making any compliments about appearance, even if they are positive as a distorted body image can mean any comments that draw attention to it can be very distressing.

As a way to help, asking a friend to join them to eat can help to normalise the eating process, and the social aspect will help act as a distraction. However, it is important that they do not feel forced to do so. Encouraging them to pursue passions that are unrelated to food or exercise can also help them to find skills and abilities that they have that are not related to their eating disorder, that they can then use to disassociate themselves with it. Lastly, asking them directly how you can help is one of the most important things you can do. This is because everyone's experience with an eating disorder is unique and so they will each have their own specific triggers, behaviours and challenges.

## A Friend's Perspective

I didn't know much about anorexia until I found out about Alex's condition. I knew what anorexia was as a psychology student, but as with most disabilities and conditions, learning about anorexia academically doesn't compare to learning through, or listening to, a friend's lived experience of them. Alex told us she had anorexia when she started our uni semester online from an in-patient unit and she started to write a blog to document her journey towards recovery. If your friend is living with an eating disorder, I'd encourage you to research and educate yourself rather than asking your friend to educate you, but it's important not to assume anything about your friend's experiences from what you might have heard about anorexia before, because anorexia is generally an extremely misunderstood condition which differs a lot between people. Through Alex I've learned a lot about the challenges of daily life, recovery and academics with an eating disorder.

We couldn't be physically with Alex because of the COVID pandemic, but the need to be there, even from a distance, was clear, so we zoomed instead, sent care packages and very much encouraged her to write her blog. The thing is though, Alex didn't

actually change, though her circumstances did, and much of our conversations were still light hearted nonsense with added fun zoom filters. I think it was important for us as friends to still have a laugh, and be casual with each other as we normally would, besides acknowledging Alex's situation and supporting where we could. Your friend who has anorexia is still your friend and a person first and foremost, and I'm dead proud of Alex anyway. 🥰

## Resources

- BEAT eating disorder charity <https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk>
- NHS Anorexia <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/anorexia/>

Personally I have found recovery coaches who have a lived experience of Eds provide really valuable insight and advice on how to recover, here are some of my favourites:

- Tabitha Farrar <https://www.youtube.com/c/TabithaFarrar>
- What Mia did next <https://www.youtube.com/c/WhatMiaDidNext>
- Genevieve Mora  
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCo3GJ3a7CKi5u30p7bxGjQQ>

Also... don't forget to check out my blog! <https://alexandra-evans00.blogspot.com/?m=1>

## About the author

- Alex Evans (she/her) is 20 years old, and from Glasgow. Currently, she is a Psychology student at the University of Glasgow and hopes to become either a clinical or educational psychologist. Alex is also an animal lover.
- Ellie Brownlie (she | they) is 21 years old, and originally from Moray in the NE of Scotland. She is currently a psychology student at the University of Glasgow and a member of the Resources team at the LUNA Project.

## GET INVOLVED!

We would love to get as many people involved in creating these resources as possible! If you are a young person living with a chronic illness, disability, or long term health condition, and would be interested in making a similar resource based on YOUR experiences, we would love to hear from you! You can email us at [thelunaprojectuk@gmail.com](mailto:thelunaprojectuk@gmail.com) ! You can also find us on social media @thelunaprojectuk !

Email: [theLUNAProjectUK@gmail.com](mailto:theLUNAProjectUK@gmail.com)

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