

What is bulimia?

Bulimia is defined as recurrent episodes of binge eating (which describes eating large quantities of food, associated with a loss of sense of control) followed by purging (compensatory behaviours for overeating).

A common misconception is that bulimia only involves making yourself sick, but other compensatory behaviours range from restricting or overexercising, to abusing medications such as laxatives or diuretics.

Another myth that is important to dispel is that bulimia (or any eating disorder!) is just about weight. Concerns about weight and a preoccupation with self-image certainly play into eating disorders, but eating disorders are much more complex than just this.

You also cannot tell whether someone has an eating disorder just by looking at them. There can be stereotypes of everyone with an eating disorder being underweight, but many people are a normal weight or overweight. Any weight loss is simply a physical side effect of a mental illness.

It's also important to note that anyone can get eating disorders. Eating disorders can be associated with young, white women, but they affect people of all races, socioeconomic status, genders, and backgrounds, and we need to drop this misconception to ensure everyone can get appropriate care.

How it affects me...

Physically...

Looking at me, you wouldn't be able to tell I have an eating disorder unless you knew, but a normal BMI is not indicative of good health.

Physical symptoms can range from fatigue and poor focus; to feeling lightheaded; to stomach issues and a whole bunch of other signs, affecting anything from your teeth, to skin, to swollen salivary glands. Unless you know, these are hard to pick up on, but as someone living with an eating disorder, it is a reminder of an illness that at times feels all consuming.

Regular monitoring of bloods, weight and even precautionary ECGs, have served as a reminder that despite my looking/functioning for the most part as if I am not unwell, that

eating disorders are dangerous illnesses. This has been something difficult to reconcile with, as naturally, eating disorders like to tell us, that things aren't really that bad.

Mentally...

The hardest part of struggling with bulimia is definitely the shame and embarrassment. This can be isolating and push one away from friends/social networks, leading you to become even more dependent on the eating disorder. It also stopped me from reaching out for a long time.

Bulimia often also goes hand in hand with depression, and I arm myself for the day with an SSRI every morning - here's a reminder that taking medications for your mental health is no different to taking an iron or vitamin D supplement!

When we aren't looking after ourselves properly, our emotions also tend to run amok - which can make it much easier to be tearful, irritable or overthink things.

Constantly thinking about food and numbers can also be quite anxiety-provoking, and definitely takes away from the more important things at hand.

This is one of the reasons I'm so determined to recover, there are better and more important things for me to focus my time and energy on, and I am worthy of this.

Life in general...

Eating disorders quickly invade every aspect of our lives. So much in our society revolves around food - and it can be at the heart of many social situations or cultural celebrations. When food is an issue, this unfortunately can also blend into the occasions marked by food, tainting these. Eating disorders share a lot with addictions, but unlike many substances, there's no possibility of becoming abstinent from food - we have to learn to navigate it.

Bulimia also costs me a lot of time - which detracts from the things I love and care about. Somewhat embarrassingly (it shouldn't be, but we don't often talk about it!), bulimia can also cost money as well as time/energy.

Finally, bulimia really erodes your self-image - it is hard to feel confident when you spend so much time kneeling in front of the toilet.

This is why I'm investing time and energy in treatment, although I always remind others that bulimia isn't all there is to me and that life is also wonderful in many ways - it could certainly be better, and I deserve this.

How a friend can help...

Ask and be open! What works for some people, might not work for others, so don't presume, or make assumptions. We often shy away from talking about issues, out of worry it'll make others uncomfortable, but this is often not the case - ask what our boundaries are, and respect them. Please look after yourselves too as friends and highlight your own boundaries - friends aren't a substitute for therapists or formal support and in supporting each other we need to look after ourselves.

Specific to food, again, it's all about communicating (and showing your open to communication), about what works best for each individual. For example, I find it useful to have friends do little things like ask me if I've eaten, if we want to eat together, or if I'd prefer to hang out in a non-food setting- but for others this could be triggering and they don't want to discuss food at all.

Don't engage - the sad reality is, sometimes our eating disorder will try to drag friends into reinforcing negative behaviours. So, if someone is, e.g., talking about their weight, simply don't comment - you can even go as far as stating you're not going to facilitate this.

Check your own internalised behaviours, e.g., please don't talk about January diet fads. That said, your issues also matter - friendship is a two way relationship, so just because I myself am struggling, that doesn't mean I am not there for you.

Some big don'ts are comments like just eat normally etc. Not useful. Ever.

At the end of the day, just keep being the friend you've always been - and don't see me as just the eating disorder. You're friends with Marina, not with bulimia.

A friend's perspective...

Marina and I met in our first year of uni (in almost the first week I think?) and became firm friends, moving in together in second year, and are now well into our third year of friendship! They have been a wild and wonderful three years, and throughout them Marina has lived with, and struggled with, bulimia. I have seen what it is like to live with bulimia, and have nothing but admiration for the way in which Marina advocates for

herself and raises awareness, all whilst living with the difficulties it brings day after day. As a friend I have wished for nothing more than for recovery to get easier for Marina, and have wanted to help with this in whatever way I can. If you are reading this, I assume that maybe you are supporting a friend with bulimia too, and so let me share some of the things I try to centre and remember:

- Firstly, and perhaps this comes intuitively to you (or perhaps it doesn't) but it is important to remember that as much as you want to support your friend in their recovery, bulimia is a mental illness that requires treatment from a whole team of healthcare professionals.
- Secondly, communicate! If your friend is struggling, and you want to support them but am not sure what the best ways to do this are, just ask! This will open up a whole line of conversation in your friendship where your friend will feel able to ask you for different things.
- You are probably going to have to do some unlearning!
- Celebrate the good bits, and laugh about the bad
- Remind them how you see them, when they can't see themselves like that.

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