

# MODULE 3C

## Activity #4 Handout

### Group #5: Eating Disorders (Fact Sheet)

#### What are Eating Disorders?

Anorexia Nervosa (AN) and Bulimia Nervosa (BN) are the two most common serious eating disorders. Each illness involves a preoccupation with control over body weight, eating and food.

- People with AN are determined to control the amounts of food they eat
- People with BN tend to feel out of control with food

Anorexia Nervosa may affect up to one in every two hundred and twenty teenage girls. Most people who have Anorexia Nervosa are female, but males can also develop the disorder.

Bulimia Nervosa may affect up to two in every hundred teenage girls. More females than males develop Bulimia Nervosa.

While these rates show that few people meet the criteria for eating disorders, it is far more common for people to have unrealistic attitudes about body size and shape. These attitudes may contribute to inappropriate eating or dieting practices, such as fad dieting, which is not the same as having an eating disorder.

Both illnesses can be treated and it is important for the person to seek advice about treatment for either condition as early as possible.

#### What are the Symptoms of Anorexia Nervosa (AN)?

Anorexia Nervosa is characterized by:

- A loss of at least 15% of body weight resulting from refusal to eat enough food
- Refusal to maintain minimally normal body weight
- An intense fear of becoming 'fat' even though the person is underweight
- Cessation of menstrual periods in girls
- Misperception of body image, so that people see themselves as fat when they're really very thin
- A preoccupation with the preparation of food
- Unusual rituals and activities pertaining to food, such as making lists of 'good' and 'bad' food and hiding food.

Anorexia Nervosa may begin with a weight loss resulting from dieting. Many people diet but only a few develop AN, so clearly dieting does not cause AN. It is not known why some people go on to develop AN while others do not. As weight decreases, the person's ability to appropriately judge their body size and make proper decisions about their eating also decreases.

### What are the Symptoms of Bulimia Nervosa (BN)?

#### Bulimia Nervosa is characterized by:

- Eating binges involve consumption of large amounts of calorie-rich food, during which the person feels a loss of personal control and following which the person feels self disgust
- Attempts to compensate for binges and to avoid weight gain by self-induced vomiting, and/or abuse of laxatives and diuretics
- Strong concerns about body shape and weight

A person with BN is usually average or slightly above average weight for height, so it is often less recognizable than the person with AN.

BN often starts with rigid weight reduction dieting in an attempt to reach 'thinness'. But again, many people diet while only a few develop BN.

Vomiting after a binge seems to bring a sense of relief, but this is temporary and soon turns to distress and guilt. Some people use laxatives, but these do not cause weight loss. Instead they make it difficult for your body to be healthy by causing dehydration and poor absorption of vitamin and minerals the body needs.

The person can make many efforts to break from the pattern, but the binge/purge/exercise cycle, and the feelings associated with it, may have become compulsive and uncontrollable.

### What Causes Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa?

The causes of AN and BN remain unclear. Biological and social factors may be involved. While there are many hypotheses about various factors involved in AN, there is no good scientific evidence which shows causality for one particular pathway.

### What are the Effects of Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa?

- **Physical effects** – The physical effects can be serious, but are often reversible if the illnesses are tackled early. If left untreated, AN and BN can be life-threatening. Responding to early warning signs and obtaining early treatment is essential. AN can lead to death from the physical effects of starvation.
- **Both illnesses, when severe, can cause:**
  - Harm to kidneys
  - Urinary tract infections and damage to the colon
  - Dehydration, constipation and diarrhea
  - Seizures, muscle spasms or cramps
  - Chronic indigestion
  - Loss of menstruation or irregular periods
  - Heart palpitations

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- **Many of the effects of AN are related to malnutrition, including:**
  - Absence of menstrual periods
  - Severe sensitivity to cold
  - Growth of down-like hair all over the body
  - Inability to think rationally and to concentrate
- **Severe BN is likely to cause:**
  - Erosion of dental enamel from vomiting
  - Swollen salivary glands
  - The possibility of a ruptured stomach or esophagus
  - Chronic sore throat
- **Emotional and Psychological Effects** – these are likely to include:
  - Difficulty with activities which involve food
  - Loneliness, due to self-imposed isolation and a reluctance to develop personal relationships
  - Deceptive behaviours related to food
  - Fear of the disapproval of others if the illness becomes known, mixed with the hope that family and friends might intervene and offer help
  - Mood swings, changes in personality, emotional outbursts or depressive feelings

### How Can Eating Disorders Be Treated?

Changes in eating behaviour may be caused by several illnesses other than AN or BN, so a thorough medical examination by a medical doctor is the first step.

Once the illness has been diagnosed, a range of health providers can be involved in treatment, because the illness affects people both physically and mentally. Professionals involved in treatment may include psychiatrists, psychologists, physicians, dietitians, social workers, occupational therapists and nurses.

Outpatient treatment and attendance in special programs are the preferred method of treatment for people with AN. Hospitalization may be necessary for those who are severely malnourished.

There is no known medication for treating AN. Many people with BN get better taking an antidepressant medicine, even if they do not have Depression.

Dietary education assists with retraining in healthy eating habits.

Counselling and specific therapies such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) are used to help change unhealthy thoughts about eating. The ongoing support of family and friends is essential.

In teenagers, a type of family therapy called Multidimensional Family Therapy is often used.

## **Group #5: Understanding Eating Disorders (Reporting Page)**

**What are eating disorders?**

**How common are eating disorders?**

**Describe some of the symptoms of Anorexia Nervosa (AN) and Bulimia Nervosa (BN):**

**What are some physical, emotional and psychological effects of AN and BN?**

**What type of treatments are available for people experiencing AN and BN?**

**What other kinds of support can help people with eating disorders recover?**