Eating problems

Many young people experience difficulties with eating food at some time in their lives. These can range from not liking foods (which happens to most people) to clinical eating disorders. It is estimated that as many as 1.15 million people in Britain suffer with an eating problem. Approximately 90,000 people are thought to be receiving treatment for either anorexia or bulimia.

ChildLine speaks to over 1,000 young people about an eating problem each year: 99 out of 100 callers are girls. Of those who give their age, we know that most are between 13 and 16 years old. But children as young as 10 and 11 years have phoned ChildLine to talk about eating problems, as well as older teenagers aged 17 and 18.

What are the most common eating problems?

Anorexia nervosa
"I have stopped eating. My teachers and my mum are always telling me off about it. It’s the only part of my life I feel in control of. I might have to go into hospital as I haven’t eaten for a couple of weeks. Mum just tries to make me eat more and so then I eat less.” Iris, 13

People with anorexia nervosa avoid eating and lose a lot of weight. In extreme cases, they can lose as much as 2 stone or 18kg in one month. People with anorexia often feel fat, even when they are very thin. They may use other ways of staying thin, such as exercising too much. They often hide food and follow very complicated plans to avoid food and appear heavier than they really are. Anorexia sufferers can become very weak and, without special help, some may even die.

Bulimia nervosa
“I can just start eating something small, but then as I eat it, something inside me snaps and... I eat so much. After I’ve [thrown up and] cleared away the mess and all the food wrappers, I feel so much better, like I’ve been cleansed – because there’s no food inside of me. But I also feel very tired, faint and sometimes tearful.” Laura, 16

Bulimia nervosa is when people binge and then make themselves sick to get rid of the food. Some people with bulimia and anorexia also use laxatives. These give you diarrhoea when taken in large doses. People with bulimia may not look overweight or underweight, which can make the problem difficult to recognise.

Repeated bingeing and purging (vomiting and/or taking laxatives) will eventually do serious damage to the body and can be very dangerous.

Compulsive eating
“I’m 13 stone and I want to lose weight, but I need to eat. I get so hungry. I want to be thin so that people will stop calling me names.” Darren, 8

Compulsive eating is when people eat much more than their bodies need over a
Eating problems

long period, or use food to comfort or
distract themselves. This can lead to being
overweight and to serious medical
problems, like heart problems or diabetes.

How do eating problems begin?
Many of the children and young people
who talk to ChildLine about eating
problems have low self-esteem or live in
stressful family situations. Any number
of other issues can ‘trigger’ an eating
problem. Often young people tell us
about a mixture of problems, such as
pressure to be thin, bullying, abuse or
the death of someone close.

When young people feel that they have
very little control of the events going on
around them, an eating problem can
make them feel more in control. Without
help, the eating problem itself can get out
of control. It can damage people’s bodies
and can leave them feeling unhappy and
bad about themselves and others,
depressed, and even suicidal.

Callers to ChildLine range from those
who are beginning to feel worried about
the amount they eat, to a smaller number
who may have had a eating disorder for
several years, which has made them very
ill. ChildLine listens to them all.

Many young people deny their eating
problem or try to keep it a secret. But the
sooner they accept that they have a
problem, the easier it is to help. Help can
include anything from talking to friends,
family or a confidential counsellor, such
as ChildLine, to seeing a doctor or
spending time in hospital.

It is important to understand that an
eating disorder is not really about food
and it is therefore not appropriate to
encourage someone with an eating
disorder to “eat up”. The eating problem
is often a mask for other issues, so
making the symptoms better for now
may not help in the long run.

What do young people tell ChildLine
about their eating problems?
- Sarah told a ChildLine counsellor that
she started to eat a lot under the
pressure of exams. She put on weight
and this led to her being teased and
called names. She became very
embarrassed about her size and said
that one of the things that helped

most was to talk to someone who
couldn’t see her.
- Niri, 15, was doing well at school, had
lots of friends and belonged to a
drama group; then her family moved
to another part of the country. Niri
developed anorexia as a way of
expressing how very upset she felt
about the move.
- Jon phoned ChildLine over many
months. He was having medical
treatment for bulimia and the whole
of his life felt out of control. He told
ChildLine that he started bingeing and
vomiting after he had been sexually
abused. He said, “There is something
bad inside me that I need to get out.”
Jon said that talking to ChildLine
helped him to feel more in control of
his life and happier about himself.

How can ChildLine help?
ChildLine counsellors listen without
blaming or criticising. They take young
people’s problems seriously.

- It can be easier to talk on the phone
than face to face, especially at first.
ChildLine counsellors will go at the
caller’s pace, and will not force the
caller to talk about anything they
don’t want to.

- Supportive family and friends are
important, but it often helps to talk to
someone who is not personally involved.

- Young people can write or phone, and
can phone just once or arrange to
speak regularly to the same counsellor
over a period of time.

- ChildLine can advise children and young
people about their eating problem.

- ChildLine takes children and young
people’s problems seriously, giving
them a chance to talk in confidence
about their concerns, however large
or small. ChildLine counsellors can
also tell them where to go for more
information, including local sources of
help and advice. This service is free
and available 24 hours a day, 7 days
a week.
Further information and advice

Publications

- Bulimia Nervosa: Getting Better Bit(e) by Bit(e): A Survival Kit for Sufferers of Bulimia Nervosa and Binge Eating Disorders, Schmidt, U. and Treasure, J., Psychology Press, 1993

beat (previously the Eating Disorders Association)
103 Prince of Wales Road, Norwich, Norfolk NR1 1DW
Website: www.b-eat.co.uk

Adult helpline: 0845 634 1414
Monday to Friday 10.30am to 8.30pm
Saturday 1.00pm to 4.30pm
Email: help@b-eat.co.uk

Youth helpline (for children and young people aged 18 or under): 08456 347650
Monday to Friday 4.30pm to 8.30pm
Saturday 1.00pm to 4.30pm
Youthline email: fyp@b-eat.co.uk
Youthline text service: 07786 201820
Children can call ChildLine on 0800 1111 (all calls are free of charge, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year).

Or write to us at ChildLine, Freepost NATN1111, London E1 6BR; or visit www.childline.org.uk

Children who are deaf or find using a regular phone difficult can try our textphone service on 0800 400 222.

Monday to Friday 9.30am to 9.30pm
Saturday to Sunday 9.30am to 8.00pm

We have a special helpline for children and young people living away from home in places such as refuges, boarding schools and young offenders’ institutions called The Line on 0800 88 4444.

Monday to Friday 3.30pm to 9.30pm
Saturday to Sunday 2.00pm to 8.00pm

ChildLine in Partnership with Schools (CHIPS) helps schools set up schemes to encourage children and young people to support each other. For more information call 020 7650 3230.

Registered charity numbers 216401 and SC037717.

Please note – all names and identifying details have been changed to protect young people’s identities.

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