



Seeking Help with Eating
and Body Image Issues

*Towson University
Counseling Center*



Eating Disorders

Eating disorders encompass a wide range of behaviors, symptoms and experiences. The behaviors usually include unhealthy strategies to promote weight loss including dieting, counting calories, purging, excessive exercise and the abuse of diet pills or laxatives. Students experiencing eating disorders are more likely to judge their worth as a person by their appearance and weight. Individuals struggling with eating disorders usually experience depressive and/or anxiety symptoms including sadness, low energy, worry and withdraw from life activities and relationships. These issues impact a wide variety of students including women of color, men, international students, athletes and students from the LGBTQ community.

Anorexia

Individuals struggling with anorexia often dislike or feel uncomfortable with their bodies and decrease their food or caloric intake significantly in an effort to control their weight. Someone dealing with anorexia will restrict her or his eating to a level below what is considered healthy and will feel very fearful of gaining weight.

There are many potential health consequences of anorexia, including death. Anorexia is considered to be one of the leading causes of death in young women age 15 to 24. Other possible health consequences include:

- Heart problems including low blood pressure and heart failure
- Muscle loss and weakness
- Severe dehydration which could result in kidney failure
- Loss or decrease in menstrual periods potentially leading to long-term reproductive consequences
- Reduction of bone density leading to osteoporosis

Bulimia

Bulimia is characterized by the use of behaviors such as vomiting, taking diet pills or engaging in excessive exercise. A student with bulimia may engage in binge eating that is followed by feelings of guilt and an intense desire to rid her or his body of the food. Bulimia may also result in death. Other possible health consequences include:

- Heart problems including irregular heart beats and heart failure
- Pancreatitis
- Stomach problems including ulcers and gastric rupture
- Damage to throat and teeth

Eating Disorder Myths

Myth: This is just a phase.

Eating disorders are serious, life threatening issues that have psychological and physical consequences. Individuals often require psychological treatment in order to recover fully and may need some form of medical intervention as well.

Myth: I am the only one who struggles in this way.

It is estimated that around 20% of college students struggle with eating disorders. Many more students experience significant issues with food and body but would not qualify for the diagnosis of an eating disorder. For most, eating disorders impact many life areas including friendships and romantic relationships, academic functioning, stress levels and self esteem.

Myth: It's not an eating disorder because I still eat ... I don't throw up every day.

When many people think of eating disorders, they often imagine more extreme forms of the disorders. Examples include a student who eats only vegetables all day or a student who vomits after every meal. A diagnosis of an eating disorder is made when one's struggle with food or body negatively impacts quality of life and/or when someone engages in behaviors meant to promote weight loss that put their life at risk. More often, people struggle in less extreme ways such as restricting their food intake throughout the day by eating a meal a day, or someone who vomits a couple times a week.

Binge Eating Disorder

Individuals struggling with binge eating disorder feel out of control with their eating and engage in consuming large quantities of food, beyond typical portion sizes. Potential health consequences of this disorder include:

- Weight gain that may lead to obesity
- Heart and blood pressure issues
- High cholesterol

Counseling

The Counseling Center at Towson University is available to assist students struggling with eating disorder symptoms and body image issues. The Center offers assessments, individual counseling, group counseling and referral services. Programs and workshops are offered throughout the academic year.

Treatment can be very helpful in the recovery from an eating disorder. Sessions may assist you with finding strategies to stop the eating disorder behaviors and to develop other techniques to deal with stress and your emotions. Counseling may also involve exploring whether particular events or experiences led to the development of the eating disorder, assisting you in better understanding yourself.

Some students who experience eating disorders may be better helped by a therapist or an agency outside of Towson University that can provide a different level of treatment such as nutritional services, psychiatry or more comprehensive treatment. If you are referred off campus, this decision should not be viewed as a rejection or taken as evidence that you can't be helped. Rather, the therapist wants to ensure that you receive the best treatment possible to help you achieve recovery and this may involve services that the Counseling Center does not offer.

Counseling Center, Glen Esk
Monday–Friday, 8:00 a.m.–5 p.m.
Phone: 410-704-2512
www.towson.edu/counseling

Myth: I can just work through this on my own.

Research suggests that most individuals who experience eating disorder symptoms require some level of intervention to fully recover. The most common form of treatment is counseling. Evidence also suggests that treatment is most effective when it is sought out early and at the appropriate level of intensity. Additionally, a student may be helped by counseling even if she or he has ceased engaging in eating disorder behaviors.

Myth: I can't be in medical danger ... I'm not thin or underweight.

An individual does not need to be underweight to be malnourished or to experience significant health problems. For example, individuals struggling with bulimia are often of average weight but are at risk of cardiac arrest due to electrolyte imbalances. You may feel fine but this does not mean that your body isn't struggling.

Physical health care

Obtaining a physical examination is extremely important when you have been engaging in eating disorder behaviors whether the behaviors started two weeks or two years ago. It may be scary to speak with a doctor because it may be difficult to talk openly. You may also be fearful that your body has been negatively impacted and you may want to avoid a physical which may confirm your fears. Obtaining medical treatment can actually lead to a reversal of some of the physical effects but delaying help can put your health at greater risk.

The Dowell Health Center offers Eating Disorder Physicals. At your appointment, you can expect that the medical professional will want to assess the impact the eating disorder has had on your body and may order laboratory tests such as a urinalysis, complete blood count and a metabolic profile. It is important to be honest with the clinician even if the information is difficult

to share. Be sure to bring your insurance card to the appointment.

Some signs that your health may be in acute danger include:

- Persistent fatigue
- Fainting
- Chest pains
- Blood seen in your vomit
- Loss of menstrual periods
- Changes in bowel movements

If you are experiencing any of these symptoms you should be seen by a physician immediately. Another option would be to visit a local emergency room.

Dowell Health Center
Monday–Friday, 8a.m.–5p.m.
Phone: 410-704-2466
<http://www.towson.edu/dowellhealth-center/>

While you are waiting: Ways to help yourself

Make small changes and implement these changes every day. If you are not successful each and every day, it's OK, just start fresh the next day. Examples of small changes include:

- Attempt to stop restricting your food intake during the day. If you go most of the day without taking in any nutritional foods, you are more likely to binge-eat at night. Try eating throughout the day to avoid binges.
- Decrease the intensity or time amount of your exercise routine. For example, cut down the amount of time you use a treadmill or at least decrease the speed. If you are malnourished, any level of exercise may be dangerous and thus you may want to stop exercising completely until you are healthier.
- Stop your use of diet pills, laxatives and/or diuretics. These medications do not produce long-term weight loss but may cause significant health issues.
- Increase your food intake. You could try adding protein or nutritional shakes or meal bars to your daily diet.
- Another option is to increase the nutritional value of your food intake. Increase the amount of fruits, proteins and vegetables you take in throughout the day.

Seek out support from trusted others. Family and friends may not understand what it's like to have an eating disorder, but maybe they could be there for you in some other way such as just listening or accompanying you to appointments.

Find assistance through reading self-help books and exploring constructive Web sites. This brochure contains a list of helpful books and Internet sites.

There is hope...

Right now you may be feeling scared about getting help and overwhelmed by all of the information you've received. Don't give up. It is possible to overcome an eating disorder and actually feel positive about yourself and your body.

Myth: I will always feel this way.

If you follow your counselor's recommendations, you should be on your way to working through your eating disorder issues. The process may be hard and take more time than you desire, but getting counseling and a physical are steps in the right direction.

Recommended Readings

Making weight: Men's conflicts with food, weight and appearance by A. Anderson, L. Cohn, & T. Holbrook

Body image workbook: An 8-step program for learning to like your looks by T. Cash

When women stop hating their bodies by J.R. Hirschmann & C.H. Munter

Transforming body image: Love the body you have by M.G. Hutchinson

Eating in the light of the moon by A. Johnston

Making peace with food: Freeing yourself from the diet/weight obsession by S. Kano

The woman in the mirror: How to stop confusing what you look like with who you are by C. Bulik

Gaining by A. Liu

Hungry for more: A keeping it real guide for Black women... by R. McGee

On eating: Change your eating, change your life by S. Orbach

Life without ED: How one woman declared independence from her eating disorder... by J. Schaefer

Recommended Web Sites

www.healthyweight.net
www.ourbodiesourselves.org
www.towson.edu/eatingdisorder
www.something-fishy.org
www.mirror-mirror.org/eatdis.htm
www.bodypositive.com
www.intuitiveeating.org
www.eatingdisordersanonymous.org
www.nationaleatingdisorders.org
www.webiteback.com

Additional Resources

Sheppard Pratt Center
for Eating Disorders

This well known treatment facility is located close to Towson University and offers a wide variety of services to individuals struggling with eating disorders. www.eatingdisorder.org; 410-938-5252

Johns Hopkins
Eating Disorders Program

This local eating disorders program offers several different levels of treatment. 410-955-3863

National Eating Disorders
Awareness Helpline
1-800-931-2237



Student Affairs

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8000 York Road
Towson, MD 21252-0001

www.towson.edu

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