

Why do People get Eating Disorders?

Eating disorders are complex illnesses, impacted by genetic, biological, psychological and socio-cultural factors.

Research is yet to identify a single cause explaining why some people develop an eating disorder. It is much more likely that some people have personal characteristics that make them vulnerable to developing an eating disorder and that the experience of specific life events then trigger the onset of illness. Once the illness is triggered, the resulting changes in thinking can act to maintain the disorder.



Pre-disposing factors may include:

- **Individual characteristics** such as high personal expectations, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, obsessive patterns of thinking/ behaving, high levels of guilt, self-blame and shame, and difficulty expressing personal needs.
- **Interpersonal factors** such as difficulty expressing and regulating emotions, troubled relationships.
- **Family factors** such as a family history of eating disorders or other mental illnesses, a strong focus on the importance of appearance, and communication style.
- **Biological factors** such as having a genetic predisposition to an eating disorder or other mental illnesses.
- **Socio-cultural factors** such as living in a culture that idealises thinness and muscularity and discriminates against those who are in larger bodies. This can be exacerbated by a societal and peer group pressure to diet, exercise and conform to a thin stereotype, believing that being thin/muscular equates with beauty success and happiness and believing that a person's worth can be judged on their appearance rather than who they are.

- Environmental factors such as hobbies or careers that require a greater than usual focus on food, body weight or shape and exercise, such as models, actors, elite athletes, and personal trainers.

“Dieting is the single biggest predictor for the development of an eating disorder” (Patton et al, 1999)

Specific life events that can lead to an eating disorder may include:

- A developmental stage i.e., adolescence
- Life crises, i.e., the loss of a loved one, relationship issues or moving to a new school/job/home
- A history of teasing or bullying based on weight or shape
- Accumulation of many life stressors
- Weight loss or weight gain
- Dieting
- Sexual, physical, or emotional abuse, or neglect

Factors that can maintain an eating disorder can include dysfunctional thinking and negative thoughts. These thinking patterns while appearing unreasonable or illogical to a healthy individual can seem reasonable to the person with an eating disorder. Having depression or anxiety can also help to maintain an eating disorder.

Treatment for an eating disorder often focuses on making behavioural changes to improve health and wellbeing first, before focusing on the underlying causes of the eating disorder. It can take years to develop insight and understanding into why you or your loved one has developed an eating disorder. Sometimes even in recovery, individuals do not fully understand why they developed an eating disorder.

Parents and families are not to blame for their loved one developing an eating disorder, however, the role of parents and families in providing support through treatment and recovery is pivotal and can improve treatment outcomes.

Patton, G. C., Selzer, R., Coffey, C. C. J. B., Carlin, J. B., & Wolfe, R. (1999). Onset of adolescent eating disorders: population based cohort study over 3 years. *British Medical Journal*, 318(7186), 765-768.