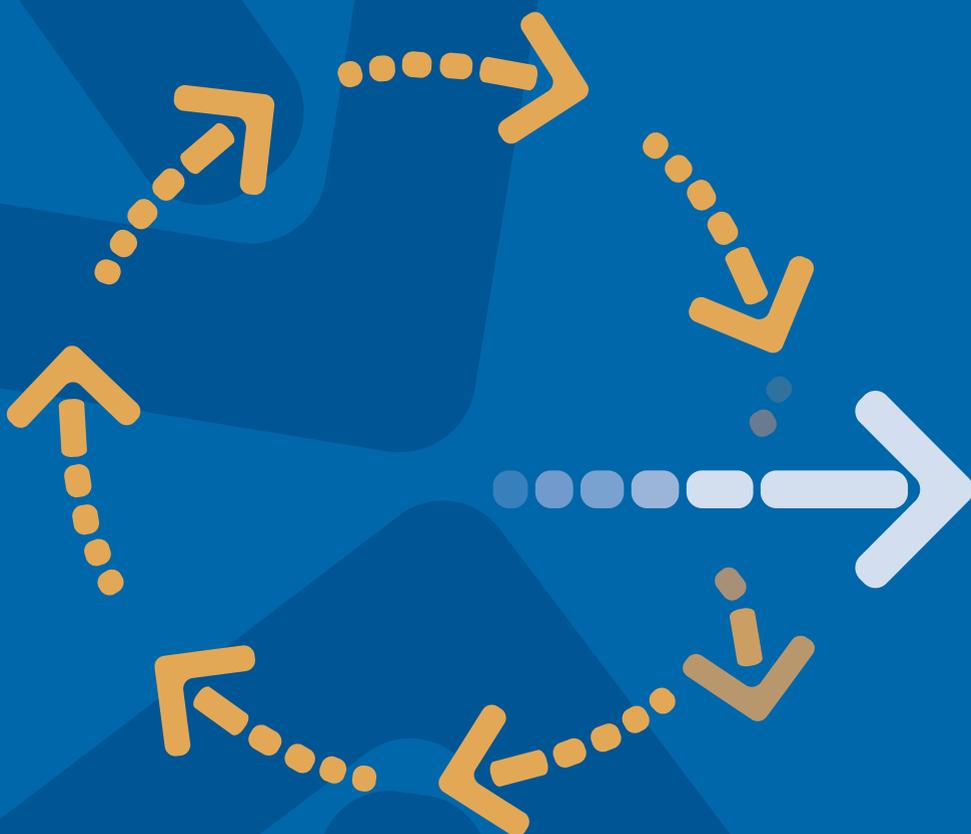


# Binge eating

Breaking the cycle

A self-help guide towards recovery



**When you experience disease of any kind, rather than regard it as an enemy to be defeated, regard it as valuable information about yourself that you can use to map your journey towards healing and wholeness.**

Dr Rudolph Ballentine, Radical Healing

This is the first edition of **Binge eating – Breaking the Cycle.**

We hope to build on this first edition in the future. If you have used this book either as a source of information or as a recovery tool, we would be very glad to receive your feedback. Your comments, positive and negative, will help us to plan future editions and will contribute to improving services to people affected by eating disorders.

Please post your feedback to Bodywhys, P O Box 105, Blackrock, Co Dublin or email [info@bodywhys.ie](mailto:info@bodywhys.ie)

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We also wish to thank all those who were willing to act as consultants in the writing and editing of this booklet.

# Introduction

When Bodywhys – The Eating Disorders Association of Ireland was first established in 1995, it provided support primarily to people affected by anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. More recently, however, an increasing number of the people who contact Bodywhys are looking for information and support in their struggle to overcome binge eating disorder or compulsive overeating. Many callers to the helpline report having lived with their disorder in isolation for years. They want as much information as possible about how to achieve freedom from what they often experience as an enslavement or addiction to food. Most people are looking for practical suggestions for regaining control over their behaviours. They feel ready to begin to engage with the process of change and want to know where to start.

**Binge Eating – Breaking the Cycle** is the result of an attempt to respond to the needs expressed by the people who have accessed our services over the years. It is the product of collaboration between volunteers and staff at Bodywhys who have put together the main elements of what they have learned first and foremost from the people who have shared their stories with us on the helpline, in support groups and through our online services.

Although the booklet was initially meant to address the lack of information and practical guidance available to people with binge eating disorder, many of the strategies offered in the self help section of the booklet may also be of great use to people caught up in the binge-purge cycle that characterises bulimia and that can also exist in anorexia.

Binge eating disorder (BED) is the clinical term for compulsive overeating. It is now recognised, alongside anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa, as one of the main eating disorders. It is also said to be the most prevalent eating disorder, occurring among at least 2% of the adult population, affecting both men and women, and affecting up to 15% of people who are obese.

In an eating disorder, food is not used to nourish the body. It is used to take care of emotional needs. Eating to meet psychological needs in this way is often referred to as **emotional eating**. Food can be used to comfort, to self soothe, to regulate mood, as a means of coping with unmanageable feelings. Food can be used to 'stuff down' feelings in an effort to feel better. Most of us use food in this way to a degree. We may eat too much or restrict our eating as a means of numbing our feelings, of distracting ourselves from an emotional state that we don't want, or with which we do not feel equipped to deal. Eating is used as a

coping mechanism. This becomes problematic when it becomes a habit that turns into a compulsion and we no longer feel we have control over it.

Recovery from an eating disorder always requires attention to both the physical and the psychological aspects of the disorder. Treatment programmes with a focus on diet and lifestyle alone are unlikely to be effective in the long term unless the psychological reasons and the emotional needs that underlie the behaviour are also addressed.

Low self esteem is one of the major risk factors common to all eating disorders and the building of self esteem is not only crucial in the prevention of eating disorders, but is also central to recovery. A return to health will also involve looking closely at the stressors in our lives and recognising that we can make choices to reduce these. Reclaiming our capacity for choice is perhaps the greatest indicator of the return to a healthier self.

With adequate support and good levels of motivation, some people will manage to recover without the help of professionals. Many others will require the assistance of professionals to guide them towards recovery.

**Binge Eating – Breaking the Cycle** is a self help booklet designed both as an information resource and as a practical tool to help you to acquire greater insight into what you are experiencing and to empower you to make choices that will facilitate change. It will help you to gain a better understanding of how your thoughts, beliefs, feelings and behaviours are interconnected and influence each other. This will provide you with a sense of greater control over your life.

The booklet can be used with or without the guidance of a healthcare professional (G.P., therapist, nutritionist, etc). It does not replace the need for medical assessment. It is not designed as an alternative to therapy nor does it offer any quick and easy solutions. Recovery will take time and commitment.

Living with an eating disorder requires a vast amount of emotional, mental and physical energy. Overcoming an eating disorder will mean learning how to start to channel this energy in ways that will enhance, rather than diminish, your capacity to enjoy life to the full.

There are now many resources available to people who want to gain a better understanding of eating disorders and how to recover from them. Rather than provide an extensive list of resources, we have included at the back of the booklet information that will signpost you to helpful resources.

# Binge Eating – Breaking the Cycle

## What is binge-eating?

Most of us overeat from time to time, and many people often feel they have eaten more than they should have. Some people, however, feel distressed by their overeating. They lose control and binge. There is a powerful craving for food which is experienced as overwhelming. They eat what most people would think is an unusually large amount of food.

Binges almost always occur in secret and an appearance of 'normal' eating is often maintained in front of others. The food that is eaten is usually filling and high in calories. It tends to be food that people regard as fattening and which they are attempting to exclude from their diet. Usually, the food is consumed very quickly. It is stuffed into the mouth almost mindlessly and barely chewed. It is seldom tasted or enjoyed and the person is constantly thinking about what to eat next. While in binge eating disorder there is no purging (getting rid of the food to prevent weight gain or to attempt to reverse feelings of lack of control, guilt, etc.), there may be sporadic fasts or repetitive diets and often feelings of shame or self-hatred surface after a binge. Body weight may vary from normal to mild, moderate, or severe obesity.

## Most binges can be divided into four stages:

**Tension Build-up** There are various factors that lead to a tension build-up. During the tension build-up you will probably experience an unsettled feeling. You might feel that something is wrong or that something is bothering you. You will probably not know exactly what is causing you to feel this way. All you know is that it is slowly but surely getting to you. Soon the tension will reach a point that demands relief and this initiates the next stage.

**Tension Release** Binge-eating releases tension and reduces anxiety. The bingeing can blot out thinking and feeling, or provide a source of distraction from problems and negative feelings. However, this sense of relief is short lived and is soon replaced by exhaustion, often called the 'binge hangover'.

**Recovery** This is the time when the symptoms of the 'hangover' predominate. These are symptoms such as headache, nausea, diarrhoea, lethargy, and fatigue.

**New Beginning** Renewed resolutions and hope characterise this brief stage. At this point you may, for example, vow not to eat anything the next day or decide to go on a strict diet.

Binge eating has only recently been acknowledged as an eating disorder, namely Binge Eating Disorder (BED). The better known eating disorder, Bulimia Nervosa involves recurrent episodes of binge eating followed by compensatory purging through exercise, self induced vomiting and/or the use of laxatives. The significant difference between Bulimia Nervosa and Binge Eating Disorder is that with BED there is no immediate attempt to counter the binge through purging, exercise or other methods.

The DSMIV (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) now classifies BED as an eating disorder and proposes a set of diagnostic criteria requiring further study. These include;

- recurrent episodes of binge eating involving eating within a discrete period of time (less than 2 hours) an abnormally large amount of food and a sense of lack of control over eating
- marked distress about binge eating; binge eating on at least 2 days per week for six months
- no regular use of inappropriate compensatory behaviours (e.g., purging, fasting, excessive exercise)
- binge eating occurs, on average, at least 2 days a week for 6 months

However, as with other eating disorders, many people will not fit the exact criteria for a formal diagnosis but they will recognise in the criteria patterns of behaviour and emotional states that correspond to what they are experiencing.

### **What causes binge-eating?**

The development of an eating disorder is best understood in terms of the interaction of a number of factors. Psychological, physical, socio-cultural and familial factors all play a part in the establishment of disordered eating. It is important to remember that the causes of eating disorders are many and can vary considerably from one individual to another.

When trying to understand the causes of Binge Eating Disorder, it is helpful to divide the various factors into those which make people vulnerable to the disorder (predisposing factors), those which play a part in bringing on the disorder (precipitating factors), and those which, once the disorder has become established, maintain it and prevent a person from recovering spontaneously (perpetuating factors).

## **Predisposing factors:**

### **Familial factors**

- › Genetic factors
- › Familial disharmony, which can cause insecurity and emotional distress
- › Familial problems around conflict management and negotiation of needs
- › Traumatic experiences such as sexual, physical and/or emotional abuse, bullying and name calling
- › Parental preoccupation or concerns around own weight and body image
- › Loss of a significant family member (through death, separation, illness, alcoholism, etc)

### **Psychological factors**

- › Low self-esteem
- › Depression, anxiety, anger, loneliness
- › Feelings of ineffectiveness and/or lack of control over life
- › A quest for perfection
- › Difficulty expressing emotions and feelings

### **Socio-cultural factors**

- › Narrow definitions of beauty that include only women and men of specific body weights and shapes
- › Cultural norms that value people on the basis of physical appearance, and not inner qualities

Eating disorders can run in families. Some researchers have shown that genetic factors play a role in predisposing a person to an eating disorder while others put more emphasis on the role of the familial environment. Families have their own specific cultures which can be maintained and perpetuated across generations. The values and attitudes that prevail in the family can influence the way family members perceive themselves, relate to each other, to others and to the world at large. These values and attitudes will also have a significant influence on the psychological development of individual family members.

Certain psychological characteristics appear to make people more vulnerable to developing BED. Low self-esteem, depression and feelings of ineffectiveness or powerlessness often precede the onset of eating problems. These feelings can be related to traumatic experiences, including familial disharmony. Difficulty expressing emotions and feelings may lead people to turn to food to deal with emotional pain. Abuse, whether sexual, physical or emotional, also has a significant impact on psychological development and can contribute to making a person vulnerable to developing problems with eating and issues around nurture in general.

People who develop eating disorders often have a tendency to perfectionism. They set very high standards for themselves and are very self critical when they fail to meet their goals. This prevents them from living fully and freely in the present.

Social factors also play a role in making a person vulnerable to developing an eating disorder. In Western societies particularly, media and societal pressures glorify thinness and place value on obtaining the ‘perfect body’. Thinness is equated with success, desirability, popularity, happiness. It also becomes associated with control, discipline and effectiveness. Parents who have issues with weight and body image can, often unconsciously, transmit these concerns to their children.

### **Precipitating factors**

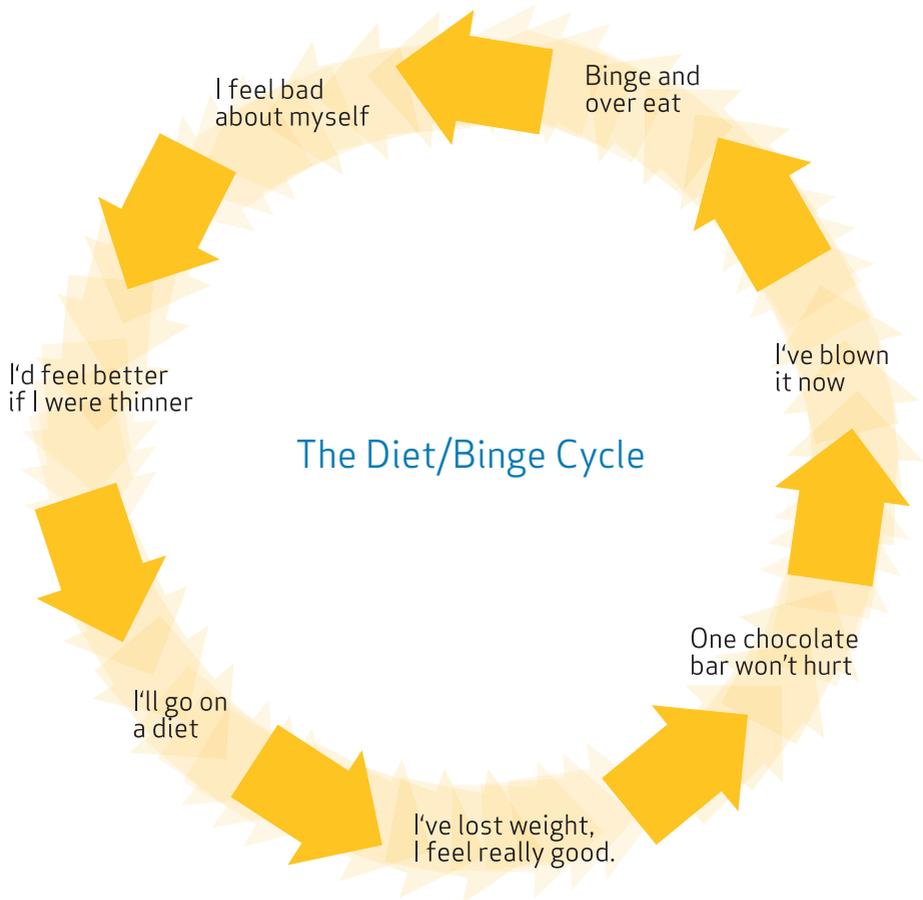
*Dieting - The single most important precipitating factor in binge-eating is a period of dieting.* Here a combination of physical and psychological factors might be involved. When your body is in starvation, it will give you strong cravings for food because it is not getting enough nutrition. Psychologically, dieting and preoccupations with food may raise the risk of loss of control. This happens when a minor slip from a person’s stringent diet causes them to abandon the diet completely and to overeat instead.

*Stress -* Some people lose control over eating after a period of stress. Many people start bingeing in response to feelings of anger and/or anxiety. Almost any difficulty that causes self-doubt or concern can manifest itself as a feeling of anxiety which a person may then attempt to alleviate with food.

*Social pressure -* In some people, a social situation or experience can bring on the binge eating. A history of being teased about being fat, or not fitting in, can provoke disturbed eating habits. Peer pressure, where friends go on a diet and a person joins in to conform, can also act as a trigger.

### **Perpetuating factors**

People with BED are often stuck in a vicious cycle of dieting and bingeing. Underlying this is a profound lack of self-esteem. This leads vulnerable people to be extremely concerned about their shape and weight, about how they are viewed by others, and can drive them to go on strict diets. The dieting then encourages overeating through both physiological and psychological mechanisms. The bingeing causes guilt and to compensate, people diet again. *The only way to break this cycle is to stop dieting.*



Understanding what made you vulnerable and brought on your binge-eating can

be very difficult. It is important to know that it is not necessary to understand

these underlying factors for you to regain control over your eating. **By focussing**

**on the factors that are maintaining the binge-eating, it is possible to change**

**your eating habits.** The self-help section of this booklet will therefore focus on

these factors. Once you have gained control over your eating, the underlying

factors often become a lot clearer and it will be easier to deal with them.

## Treatment and Support

Your binge-eating will probably not go away on its own and you will need some form of help. Some people will be able to recover by means of self-help. Others will need some form of professional intervention and support.

As with all eating disorders, getting help can feel very threatening because it will involve moving out of your emotional comfort zone. Up until now, you have been using your bingeing to cope with unmanageable feelings, to keep you feeling 'safe'. You know that keeping yourself 'safe' in this way is not making you happy and is impacting on your life in negative ways. Reaching out for help, whether from a trusted family member or friend, a confidential helpline service or a health professional, often represents the first courageous step towards giving up the bingeing. If your motivation to overcome your bingeing is not strong enough, you may find yourself in two minds about getting help. Remember that getting better is about reclaiming control of your life and that includes making choices about your journey forward. You can ask to be part of every decision along the way. Reaching out for support and guidance does not take away from you the right to set your own pace and map your own route. Your recovery journey is about taking your power back, reclaiming it from the disorder that has come to control you. All health professionals with a good knowledge of eating disorders will understand how important this is for you and will be willing to work with you at achieving this.

### Self-help

Self-help is always a good place to start because you will be educating yourself about your eating disorder. Most self-help methods are designed to help you to bring the unconscious thoughts and beliefs that fuel your feelings and your behaviour into your conscious awareness. The more you are in a position to observe your behaviours and what is fuelling them, the more control you will be able to gain over them. Self-help can involve following a self-help manual either on your own or with guidance from a professional. Some people find that they need the structure of a group (either a support group or a therapy group) or more supervised treatment to recover fully. Research has shown that self-help based on a manual can be an effective treatment for binge eating disorder particularly when it is accompanied by a few sessions of guidance, even when this is given over the telephone. Many people choose to work collaboratively with a health professional and combine the use of a self-help manual with regular guidance and support sessions. Their choice of professional will depend very much on their individual needs and preferences.

If you have chosen the self-help route and find you cannot make sufficient

progress on your own, you will probably need to access further help. Below is an outline of some of the options open to you:

### **Your Family Doctor (GP)**

A trusted GP can be a very important ally. Eating disorders have both physical and psychological consequences and a GP can assess the state of both your physical and psychological health and help you to determine your support and treatment needs. If necessary, he/ she can provide you with ongoing monitoring and/or a referral to another professional. A visit to the GP can also provide a helpful reality check and boost your motivation to recover.

Many people have fears around approaching their GP. They may have fears around confidentiality or they may fear being judged or that they may not be taken seriously. They may feel ashamed and undeserving of help. It will help if you can jot down these fears and be open about them to your GP. If you feel this might be difficult, identify someone that you can talk to about these fears (a trusted family member or friend, a helpline volunteer). Accepting that your fears are valid and normal, and voicing your fears to someone who understands can go a long way towards diminishing them and freeing you up to move forward.

### **Nutritional Counselling**

This involves seeing a registered nutritionist or dietician who can help you to correct food myths and design meal plans that will support your efforts to restore healthy and enjoyable eating. A dietician can also provide guidance and support if you are following a self-help manual and help you to gain a better understanding of the relationship between your eating patterns, your emotions and your behaviour. If you decide to keep a food diary (see the Self-help section of this booklet), it will become an invaluable recovery tool to bring along to sessions.

### **Family Treatment**

An eating disorder affects not only the person with the eating disorder but also has a significant impact on family members and partners. Family meetings offer guidance, exploration and advice as to how to support someone who binge eats towards recovery. Family members can be helped to increase their awareness of what recovery involves and to set realistic expectations. They can also be helped to develop an understanding of what hinders and what supports recovery.

An eating disorder can reflect problems within the family. Family therapy can be very helpful in encouraging members to communicate, learn to support each other, and express emotions more openly and appropriately. Where there has

been trauma in the family such as bereavement, separation, divorce, serious illness, abuse, etc., family therapy can provide a safe space where the trauma can be addressed. Family therapy also provides an opportunity for family members to look at their family dynamics and to explore how these might be maintaining the eating disorder. They can then be guided to make helpful changes that will ultimately benefit the entire family.

### **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy**

Across all studies, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) seems to be recognised as one of the most effective therapies for treating both bulimia and binge eating disorder. CBT for binge eating disorder is based on the view that there are both thinking and behavioural patterns involved in the maintenance of BED. This type of treatment aims to help people regain control over their eating and to moderate their concerns about their weight and shape. Regaining control includes identifying triggers and weakening the connection between triggers and the behaviour that follows. Concerns about weight and shape are addressed by identifying, challenging, and changing both limiting and defeating beliefs and thoughts, and negative self criticism. Most self-help manuals are based on a cognitive behavioural approach and self-help in combination with this type of therapy has proven to be very effective for many people with BED.

### **Interpersonal Psychotherapy**

Interpersonal therapy (IPT) for binge eating disorder does not focus on food and/or weight issues. It involves identifying the interpersonal problems that have led to the development and maintenance of the binge eating. The client and the therapist work together and focus on addressing the specific interpersonal changes desired.

A therapist will often use a combination of interpersonal and cognitive behavioural approaches in their work with a client. The reflective work that is undertaken when completing a food diary can be a very valuable aid both in cognitive behavioural and in interpersonal psychotherapy.

### **Antidepressant Medication**

Studies of drug based treatment of BED show that antidepressants can be of benefit in some cases. Frequency of binge eating as well as preoccupation with food and eating may decrease. Mood can also improve. However antidepressant medication is not thought to have a long-term impact on BED. Although people may binge less, few actually stop altogether. In many cases the positive effects of antidepressants do not last.

It is important to remember that taking medication will not address your eating habits and your tendency to diet. Neither will it resolve any of the deeper emotional issues that lie behind the eating disorder.

Finding the right treatment and support to suit your needs is important. If you don't get the help you need when you first seek treatment or support, don't let this put you off. Keep trying until you find something that works for you.

### **Making your decision to take back control**

Overcoming difficulties with eating can be very challenging. In order for you to really change your eating habits, you will need to be sure that your motivation levels are high. It could be helpful to ask yourself why you want to change your eating habits and to write down your reasons

## My reasons to change my eating habits

There are many reasons for changing. Think of what it could be like for you if you did manage to change your eating habits. You will be working towards reducing and eventually stopping binge eating. You will be able to return to eating ordinary meals at ordinary times. You will be free of the shame and guilt you often feel after binge eating. There will be no more need for secrecy about your eating habits. Your relationships with others will improve and be less strained. Your social life will be more enjoyable. Anxieties around intimacy will decrease. Food and eating will stop dominating your life and you will not be so intensely concerned about your weight and shape. Both your physical and your emotional health will improve. Your self esteem will increase. You will feel less burdened by negative thinking and negative emotions. You will gain a sense of freedom ...The gifts of recovery are endless!

Whatever your particular reasons for wishing to change, it is important to emphasize the value of being well motivated. Change will not be possible without a good level of motivation. You may find it helpful to read the whole booklet to help you assess how motivated you are to undertake what is involved in changing. If you feel that perhaps you are not yet motivated enough (i.e. you recognise that you do not yet feel that the benefits of changing outweigh the benefits of remaining as you are), you may need to enlist help to work on your motivation levels.

Try writing out a list of what you feel you have to gain by remaining as you are and another of what you will gain from recovery. Be as honest with yourself as you can about what you really want for yourself and work at tipping the balance in favour of recovery. Ask yourself to what extent the voice of the eating disorder is determining what you put on your list of reasons. Talk back to that voice and make any changes to your list that might seem appropriate. Don't force yourself towards readiness for change. Accept and acknowledge where you are at this point in time. However slowly and hesitantly you may decide to move forward, an honest assessment and acceptance of where you are *now* is in fact the only place to start.

It is also important that you have the necessary supports in place to do this work. Once you have made the decision to change you will need to decide what kind of support you need. Do you need someone who can play an active part or do you just need general support from the people you know? Support can come from your family, a friend, colleagues in the workplace, etc. Where you choose to look for support will depend very much on your individual circumstances. Whatever you decide, try to be open, honest and direct with others about your support needs.

Once you have read through the entire booklet and have an idea of what is required for change, you can decide on the day you are going to start. It will also be worthwhile considering whether now would be the right time to start. If you are going away on holiday soon or if you are in the middle of a relationship breakdown, exams, or any other stressful situation, now might not be the right time.

Make sure that you feel comfortable with the guidelines in the booklet and that you can commit to them. If not, it would be best if you postponed starting until the time is right and you feel you can make the necessary commitment. On the other hand, unless there is a serious reason for not starting now, try to commit yourself to beginning at a definite time in the near future.

## SELF-HELP

### **How to use this Self-help section**

Up to now this booklet has provided you with general information about binge eating. What follows are self-help suggestions consisting of basic elements that could help you regain control over your eating. The aim is to provide you with guidelines so that you can take the first steps to help yourself. You will need to read through the entire self-help section to get an idea of what it entails and to help you decide whether you are ready to undertake the journey.

Once you start following the guidelines, you might find some of them very helpful and others less so. As you become more aware of your eating and how you relate to food, you will realise which of the guidelines meet your needs. The key is to apply and adapt the guidelines so that they work for you. Through a process of trial and error you will be able to design your own self-help programme with the help of the guidelines provided. You may also have identified other strategies that have been helpful to you in the past or you may have come across self-help guidelines and resources elsewhere that suit your needs. Do not feel that you have to limit yourself to what is suggested in this booklet.

### **Keeping a Food Diary**

If you are going to begin to change your eating habits, then it is important that you know exactly how you are eating at the moment. One way of doing this is by keeping a detailed daily record of when you eat, what you eat, whether you felt what you ate was excessive, whether you felt out of control, and other details that might be relevant to modifying and reorganising your eating habits. At first you might find it very difficult to keep a diary as it will confront you with your eating problems. You may feel very tempted to stop writing your diary after you have had a binge. However, for you to begin to change, it is necessary that you do become aware of exactly what is happening with your eating. Don't be discouraged. You will soon realise that keeping a food diary is actually helping you with this process. If you find it very distressing, now might be the time to enlist some support or seek help from a professional.

There is a blank food diary form at the back of the booklet which you can photocopy for your own use.

### General Guidelines

- › Use a standard form (sample at back of booklet)
- › Use a separate sheet for each day
- › Record everything you eat, not just the things you feel happy about
- › Record things when they are happening. Don't wait until the end of the day, as this could make it very inaccurate

### Specific Guidelines

- › In the first column record the time at which you eat
- › In the second column record all the food and liquid that you consume during the day. Be reasonably specific (for example: small bowl All Bran; two Mars bars)
- › In the third column state where you ate
- › The fourth column is for recording why you ate at that specific time. What kind of hunger made you eat at that time? Were you physically hungry (body hunger)? Was it in response to a craving (mouth hunger)? Was it out of habit? Or was it time to eat (e.g. lunch) according to your Meal Plan (see page 17)
- › In the fifth column, indicate if the food was eaten during a binge. Do this by placing an asterisk (\*) in this column next to any item of food which you felt at the time was excessive and which you wished you had not eaten
- › The sixth column is for recording how you felt at the time you ate. It could include everyday events like having had an argument with you partner. Or it could be specifically related to your eating, such as describing how you felt after a binge, or describing the events that led to a binge. This process is crucial to your coming to understand what sort of things lead you to binge

## Food Diary: My Daily Food Choices

Date:

*(This is an example of the kind of things that a person starting out might record in their diary)*

Time	Description & Quantity	Where	Type of Hunger	Binge? *	Feelings
8:30	1 apple, black coffee	Kitchen	BH		I'm determined to eat healthily today. A bit anxious. Hope I can keep it up
9:00	Low Fat yoghurt	Bedroom	BH		Annoyed. Didn't want to eat so soon again. But very hungry. Couldn't beat the urge
11:00	4 slices of bread with honey	Kitchen	BH		Thought honey would give me energy. But feel worse
11:20	2 packets of crisps 1 chocolate bar	Car	MH		Went out to buy newspaper. Had to buy something to eat. Will eat nothing for rest of day
12:00	4 slices of bread with lots of cheese	Kitchen	MH		I just had to eat. Cheese is so fattening. I might as well go on eating
	More cheese 1 pack of crackers	Kitchen		*	
	Salami Handfuls of Coco Pops, Rest of crackers	Kitchen		*	
	Leftover lasagne, cold, straight from fridge			*	
	Ice cream from tub 4 glasses of water			*	

Physical hunger = Body hunger = BH

Craving = Mouth hunger = MH

Once you have been monitoring your eating for a week, review the week as a whole and begin to try to identify any patterns in your eating. It could be very helpful to continue the reviewing process and to have a fixed appointment with yourself each week for this purpose. This will provide you with valuable information which you can use to decide which techniques and methods will be helpful to you in regaining control of your eating. You will discover your individual eating pattern - what you eat and when you eat. This food awareness is essential to recovery.

The information that you record in your food diary can be very valuable information to explore during sessions with a nutritionist or therapist. If you do choose to share this information with someone else, it is important that you ask yourself how honest your diary is. If you find that you are tempted to modify what you are recording in your diary, ask yourself why. The very feelings that are motivating you to leave things out or to change details to make them more 'acceptable' to a potential reader are feelings that could usefully be explored in counselling/ therapy sessions.

**Food Diary: My Daily Food Choices**

Date:

*(This is an example of the kind of things that a person starting out might record in their diary four weeks later)*

Time	Description & Quantity	Where	Type of Hunger	Binge? *	Feelings
9:00	All Bran, Low fat yoghurt, apple	Kitchen	BH		Enjoyed this
11:00	1 slice toast and cottage cheese	Kitchen	Time		Wasn't that hungry, but wanted to stay with my meal plan
13:00	Chicken salad Pasta	Dining room	BH		I'm happy with my food choices so far. Bit nervous about going to friend's in afternoon. It's her birthday. There will be so many sweet things..
16:00	Coffee Piece of cheesecake 4 goldgrain biscuits	Friend's place			This went ok. Feel a bit guilty. But I didn't lose control. Will have something light for dinner.

Time	Description & Quantity	Where	Type of Hunger	Binge? *	Feelings
19:00	Grilled fish 2 small new potatoes Salad	TV room	BH		Not a bad day. Wish I could stop thinking about food all the time even though I'm unhooking from the behaviour. Finding discipline of it all so hard! Still feel anxious I won't be able to keep it up.
22:00	Apple				

Physical hunger = Body hunger = BH      Craving = Mouth hunger = MH

### Devising a Meal Plan

Going without food for long periods in order to lose weight really is self-defeating. It takes no account of how food is metabolised in the body for optimum health. Your metabolic rate is the rate at which your body processes food and converts it into fuel. Alternating between restricting your food intake and bingeing plays havoc with your metabolism. Repeatedly decreasing your calorie intake will encourage your body to go into conservation mode and will slow down your metabolism. When your metabolism slows, your body cannot function properly. Restoring healthy patterns of eating will be crucial to rehabilitating your metabolism.

Your binges set you up to restrict your food intake, and your diets set you up to binge. You are trapped in a cycle.

Following an eating routine or meal plan in which meals or snacks occur every 2-3 hours can be very helpful in preventing binges. When you have finished a meal or snack, look at the clock and count forward two and a half hours. This will ensure that you know exactly when your next meal is scheduled. Knowing that you will eat again soon will help keep you calm and reduce the urge to binge. If you do find yourself tempted to binge, try to remind yourself that each time you can hold off until your next scheduled meal you will be helping yourself to break the defeating cycle that has been dominating your life. You will be adding to the store of positive energy that brings you closer to your goal.

When designing your meal plan, you can still think along the lines of breakfast, lunch and dinner, adding two snacks and something light before you go to bed. For someone who has always been trying not to eat, eating this regularly can be a frightening and daunting task. The point of all this is to replace the pattern of alternating between not eating at all and overeating, with a pattern of regular eating. Remember that this is a caring process and by eating regularly you are looking after yourself.

Your food diary and your meal plan can be used together. Reviewing your food diary will help you determine whether your meal plan is effective and whether you need to make changes.

### An example of a meal plan

Time	Meal	Description
8:30	Breakfast	Bowl of cereal, milk, piece of fruit, black coffee
11:00	Snack	Cream crackers with cottage cheese
13:00	Lunch	Baked potato with tuna salad, yoghurt, coffee
16:00	Snack	Cereal bar or packet of snacks
19:00	Dinner	Grilled chicken breast, rice, vegetables
	Bedtime	Slice of brack and glass of milk

*You will find a blank form for meal plans at the back of this booklet which you can photocopy for your own use.*

### Skills for developing healthy eating

It is important that you choose food that you are happy with for your meals and snacks. This means that it should be food that you feel comfortable eating and which will not lead you to binge.

In the early stages you might find yourself turning to low-calorie or diet food. This is not necessarily a problem, provided you are getting enough to eat. Remember that you are trying to move away from the idea of eating to control weight. Base your changes on creating health rather than on losing weight. When

creating health is the aim of your food choices, you will find that, in time, the food you want the most is the food that makes you feel the best.

What you eat at each meal will affect your energy levels and mood. If you are keeping a food diary and reviewing it regularly, all the information you need will be available to you to help you determine the changes you need to make. Guidance from a nutritionist could be very helpful if you are finding it difficult to identify patterns or to recognise triggers. Important factors such as the regulation of blood sugar levels are quite complex and vary from one individual to another.

It is a good idea to create boundaries for your meals. Planning meals and snacks in advance is one way of doing this. Another is to decide before you begin a meal exactly how much you are going to have and to put the food on a plate. You should then leave the food preparation area. A useful strategy then is to identify one item (e.g. a piece of fruit) that will be the 'full stop' to the meal. This ensures that the meal has a pre-planned end.

Planning in advance also allows you to shop more mindfully for your food and not to overstock foods that may tempt you to binge. If it helps, don't shop for the full week at once. Notice the strategies that support your efforts to take back control and use them to your advantage.

Take it one day at a time. You know you could eat what you want, but for today you are choosing to eat small amounts of healthy food at regular intervals. Initially, you may not be eating in response to your natural hunger. This is something that you will be able to get back to over time.

Make every meal look as appetising and attractive as possible. If it helps, celebrate the meal by lighting candles or playing music. Anything that encourages the use of all your senses will help to increase your awareness and attentiveness and keep you mindful of what you are doing. By bringing you into the present moment, these little strategies can become powerful factors in helping you to break out of your enslavement to habits of the past.

Identifying 'dangerous times' when you are vulnerable to bingeing is important. Make a list of alternative activities that you can do instead of eating (e.g. calling a friend or going for a walk, completing a manageable task that you have been putting off) and plan to do them at your dangerous times. Having a lot of unstructured time alone, resulting in boredom, can also trigger a binge. This often happens during holidays. Having a list of activities in place and structuring your time more effectively will help you cope.

Actively eating will ensure that you are getting all the benefits from your meal. This means avoiding watching TV, or reading the newspaper while you are eating. If you are in the office, close the door, take the phone off the hook. As a general rule, it can be helpful to allow yourself 15 minutes for snacks and 30 minutes to eat main meals. Rushing your meals will be counter productive. Mindful eating is the aim.

At the end of the meal you should feel comfortably full, not distended. If you have overestimated the amount of food you need, and you find yourself becoming full towards the end of the meal, it is important that you allow yourself to leave food on the plate. Learn to throw the excess food away.

Make sure that you take time to notice how the food tastes and feels in your mouth. Take longer before you swallow. All this will help to make you feel more satisfied while you are eating.

Be sensible with alcohol. Many people find it very difficult to control their eating after they have been drinking.

When you start with your commitment to planned eating, don't worry if you find that your mind is totally preoccupied with food, with what you are going to eat and when. Try not to let this distress you or discourage you. This is quite normal and only lasts a short while until you become used to your new structure. Gradually you will go through the day able to implement your meal plan without giving it further thought.

Try to stick to the decisions that you have made in advance. If you still feel hungry after you have ended your meal, try to ignore this feeling and stick to your decision not to eat any more. If you change your eating plan because of these feelings your eating will become disorganised again. Instead, adapt your plan for the following day, having learned from your experience. Reviewing your food diary at the end of each day will help you to do this.

The people around you may not always be helpful when you are trying to change your eating habits. Let people know what you need from them. If you can, tell your family about your plans right from the start. If you are presented with gifts of chocolate or other treats 'to cheer you up' try to find a way of letting people know that this is not helpful to you. If you have children you might feel that it will be impossible for you to follow a meal plan. It need not be. This could be an opportunity to introduce healthy eating habits that will benefit the whole family. It could be helpful to discuss the changes you want to make with them, instead of just changing everything without them understanding why. Ensure

that they feel they will still have choices. Flexibility rather than rigidity will help the family to work together.

Since your aim is to eat healthy meals at regular times, there is no reason why the whole family cannot eat the same food. This will help you eliminate your desire to diet. Eating with others will also help you create boundaries for your meals and maintain a healthy relationship with food. Plan your meals well in advance. This will ensure that you have the food that you need in the house and you won't have to make any last minute changes, which might trigger a binge. Decide which meals you are going to have with your family and decide on a dish that you will be comfortable eating with them. In the beginning, you might find it difficult to eat the same food as your family. Gradually, you can work this into your meal plan.

### Stop Dieting

Dieting is recognised as the single most important precipitating factor in BED. It also plays a major role in maintaining BED. Understanding and dealing with all the causes of your binge eating can be very difficult. It is however possible for you to understand and deal with dieting as a cause of your binge eating. BED follows a predictable pattern of diet/binge cycles, and the only way to break this cycle is to stop dieting.

No one else can convince you to stop dieting. If you have been dieting most of your life, the very thought of stopping may be terrifying. You may fear that if you stop, you will lose control and binge. You need to allow yourself to accept that these binge/diet cycles exist in your life. Try to think of how the cycles affect your life. If you can acknowledge that dieting is causing you to binge, it will be easier for you to let go of it.

If you gradually replace your pattern of dieting and binge eating with regular meals, you are unlikely to gain weight. If you do experience some changes in body weight, try not to panic. Once you begin to eat regularly and healthily, you will be able to achieve a healthy weight that is comfortable for you.

If you are keeping a food diary, by now you may be able to identify times where a binge follows a period of restriction. If not, it might help to consider the following for the next few weeks:

- Notice when you are restricting yourself
- How long does it take you to reach for food for comfort?
- What things do you say to yourself when you are reaching for the food?
- Is there a point where the guilt kicks in?

- ▶ What kind of things do you say to yourself then?
- ▶ Do you have the urge to diet again?

If exploring your feelings around dieting and bingeing is causing you distress or making you resistant to progress, then it may be helpful to share these feelings with someone who has a good understanding of the process you are going through – this could be a trusted family member or friend, a counsellor, therapist or other professional.

You could also approach it from another angle. Stop dieting for a while (a few weeks if possible) and see what happens. Try to follow a meal plan based on the guidelines set out in this booklet. This will help you not to diet as you will be eating regular meals. Remember to keep a food diary. See whether there have been any improvements in your eating habits. It will also be easier for you to identify other factors that cause you to binge, since you have eliminated dieting. Observe what is happening to your weight.

### **Changing your thought patterns**

Your concerns about your weight and shape form the basis of your desire to diet. Changing your behaviour patterns will help you to stop dieting, but in order for this to have long lasting effects, it is important that you challenge and change your thought patterns as well.

Your thoughts and beliefs influence everything you feel about yourself and everything you do. It is likely that how you feel about your weight and shape is closely related to how you feel about yourself. If you lose weight, you probably feel you are a better person. If you gain weight, you feel like a failure and you believe that people will like you less. Neither of these feelings represents the truth. In reality, you are essentially the same person irrespective of body weight, even though you may not feel like the same person.

Building new thought patterns to establish a more positive image of yourself is integral to recovery.

Everybody talks to themselves all the time. Stay alert to the chatter in your mind and notice negative self talk. When the self-critical voice pops up, it will help if you have a strategy for turning the negative thoughts into positive ones. When you find yourself being self-critical, stop and pay yourself a compliment, find something positive and affirming to say about yourself. When you treat yourself better, your body and mind become stronger and you will be more likely to overcome your unhealthy eating habits. Remember that your thoughts and feelings are intimately connected to your physical health.

Uncomfortable feelings often trigger a binge. Eating numbs out feelings and distracts attention from problems. Facing up to and tackling your emotions head on is a valuable strategy to cope with this kind of bingeing. This may involve confronting a colleague, discussing an unpleasant topic with your partner, or setting boundaries for your child. Whatever it is, dealing with the situation and naming what is happening rather than avoiding it is more likely to resolve the problem and may also relieve the urge to eat.

Each time you feel upset, look for the thoughts that made you feel this way. Try to work out whether they are rational or irrational. If there is no direct evidence for this thought, then it is probably irrational. Try to replace the thought with a rational one. For example, when you are stuck in traffic and you find yourself thinking how stupid you were for taking this route, try to realise that all the people around you took the same route and that this thought is therefore irrational.

Body image confidence is characterised by mostly positive feelings about your body shape and size. Your body is valued as a good part of you that can help you enjoy life. For people who are confident about their bodies, all foods are seen as fitting into an overall healthy diet, without a sense that some foods are 'good' and some 'bad'. Here are some suggestions to help you improve your body image:

- Your body is much more than what is visible from the outside! Reminding yourself of this will encourage you to be less focused on your appearance and more focused on your sense of wholeness.
- Remind yourself that being healthy means that you are well rested, eating well, thinking clearly and nurturing your soul. Your inner self and your outer self mirror each other.
- Talk to yourself in the mirror. Focus on what you like and remind yourself that it is okay to like and appreciate what you see. Affirm yourself!
- Remind yourself that you don't want your body to be like that of anyone else - work towards totally embracing and accepting your own body. Work towards celebrating your uniqueness.
- Take risks to challenge yourself. Think of things you normally wouldn't do and try them. For example, set aside time for a relaxing evening to take care of yourself. Care for your body by treating yourself to a massage with the money you have saved by reducing your bingeing!

- Visit somewhere you would not normally go on your own. Spend time with yourself. The first person you need to get to know and love is yourself!
- Acknowledge yourself and focus on your positive qualities and your talents. Make sure that you are not being too hard on yourself. However, don't dismiss or ignore those qualities that you don't like about yourself. Take a closer look and then think about what you can do to change them.

It is likely that you have developed a set of rules for yourself about how to behave or how to be as a person. Insisting on being perfect and seeing yourself as a failure if you're not will only make you feel worse about yourself. Instead of striving to be perfect, strive to do your best. Tell yourself that you can't control everything, but that you can handle whatever happens. Remember that the only thing that you need to be able to deal with is what is arising in this present moment. If you can limit yourself to attending to the present moment without burdening yourself with what belongs in the past or might belong in the future, your task becomes so much easier!

Challenging and changing the way you think can be very difficult, especially when you attempt to do it on your own. Cognitive behavioural therapy could be very helpful as it focuses specifically on identifying, challenging, and changing defeating thoughts and negative self criticism.

### **Looking after your physical health**

The chances are that you feel bad about your body. Many people who are unhappy about their bodies, tend to see their bodies as separate from themselves. They may not like looking at themselves in the mirror, touching their bodies, or having someone else get physically close to them. If you don't like your body, you are likely to neglect it. There are lots of small things that you can do to get in touch with your body and even make you feel better about it such as having a massage, dancing, having your hair cut, wearing a new perfume/ after shave.

However, the most important thing you can do for your body is exercise. Exercise is also an important part of maintaining an efficient metabolism. If you want to have long-term success with the changes you have made in your eating, incorporating exercise in your new lifestyle will be important. Exercise can increase your metabolic rate and tone your muscles. It is also a good way of dealing with stress and will therefore decrease your urge to binge.

There are many forms of exercise and it is important that you choose something that fits in with your life and can become an enjoyable habit. A simple and

effective form of exercise is walking. It exercises and tones all the muscles in your body. You don't have to join a gym or use complicated equipment. Here are some guidelines:

- Decide on the date that you are going to start
- Set aside specific times for your walks and write them in your meal plan. This will motivate you and help you make walking a part of your everyday life. If possible, don't let anything interfere with these times
- If you have children, you can include them in your exercise schedule. On the other hand, walking alone could be a good time for you to take a break. Don't feel guilty about taking this time for yourself
- Walk three or four times a week for it to be effective
- Try not to let two days go by without walking
- Build up to 45 minutes of walking for it to be beneficial. Remember, however, that every little helps. If you have only ten minutes to spare - use it
- You will need a good pair of trainers
- Wear comfortable clothes
- Try to stay in the moment. Take an interest in what is around you. Connect with the sounds, sights and smells as much as you can. This practice helps you to bring your awareness into the here and now. It increases your capacity for mindfulness and allows you greater enjoyment of what you are doing.

Regular exercise will require a big commitment. There will be days when you are not going to feel like walking. To help motivate you, think about what you will get out of this commitment and write it down (see box on next page).

## What I will get out of doing regular exercise?

### Looking after your emotional health

Developing a holistic approach to body and mind is very important in recovery from an eating disorder. The body and mind are not separate entities.

Try to get into the habit of practising emotional self care daily.

Learning to deal effectively with emotions involves connecting with your emotions as they arise.

Here are some steps you can take to help you to use your emotions to enhance your health:

- ▶ *Identify the emotion.* Name it, define and describe it as clearly as you can. If you are experiencing turmoil, try to remove yourself to a quiet place to help you identify what you are feeling.
- ▶ *Observe the emotion in your body.* Bring your full attention to it. Slow down and deepen your breathing. Allow your awareness to experience fully the physical sensations. Just be there with the emotion. This will help you not to identify with the emotion and let it overwhelm you. You will be able to distinguish between the feeling and the person (you) who is witnessing the feeling.
- ▶ *Take responsibility for your feelings.* How you feel is not anybody's fault. Your feelings are neither 'right' nor 'wrong'. All of us experience a whole range of feelings – anger, excitement, disappointment, joy, sadness, contentment, worthlessness, confidence, fear, etc. Once we accept what we are feeling, it becomes easier for us to find the right response. For example, when someone asks us to do something for them and we are already under a lot of pressure, or we simply don't want to do it, we may feel angry and be inclined

to lash out. In fact, what we need to do is say 'no'. By saying 'no' we are choosing to take better care of ourselves. Once we realise that we have the power to choose how we can respond, we feel more in control and we are more likely to respond in a way that meets our real needs. It is not your responsibility to make other people feel better. Your responsibility is to take care of yourself.

- *Express your feelings.* You can do this in private, to yourself. Speak them aloud or write them down. Express any details and insights connected with the feeling. Describe also the feelings that you are experiencing in your body as you do this work. This is a very powerful way of releasing your emotions and allowing all the energy in your body to return to a healthy state of flow. Releasing the emotion can also be done through physical activity – a massage, physical exercise or even breathing exercises.
- *Treat yourself to something that brings you enjoyment!*

### **Dealing with difficulties**

There will be days when you run into difficulties. If you have a set back or a slip, you might be very tempted to abandon your meal plan for the day and continue bingeing. Take charge and intervene as soon as possible. Stop and think about what is happening. You might need to leave the house and go for a walk. It will be very helpful if you have a specific person you can call or visit when you are starting to slip. Remember that when a slip occurs, it is within your power to decide that you will not continue to binge.

The important thing to do when something goes wrong is to get back to your eating plan as soon as possible. Try not to use a slip as an excuse to continue bingeing and avoid skipping your next meal to compensate for the binge. Try to eat your next meal as planned. This will be extremely difficult since you have just overeaten and you will automatically want to diet or fast, but getting back to the plan will provide you with real protection against further episodes of loss of control.

What you can do is to replace a filling item with something lighter. Be careful not to replace a whole meal with, for example, an apple. You should still have a proper meal.

If a slip causes you to become overwhelmed by fear, or anxiety, or feelings of self-recrimination and self-loathing, seek support as soon as you can to help you deal with your feelings. Know that these feelings are normal and that you

will be able to move beyond them. If you are attending a counsellor or psychotherapist, bringing what you have experienced into your next session will give you something very concrete and very valuable to work on. Try not to let disappointment in yourself, or the belief that your therapist will be disappointed in you, prevent you from sharing valuable information about what you are experiencing. Try to imagine yourself as the witness to your slip. View it objectively as part of how things are evolving and moving. Above all, try to view it as a simple fact and attach no judgement to it. Learning not to judge yourself is essential to developing and maintaining a more positive and accepting attitude towards yourself – one of the most important building blocks of self esteem.

Slips or set backs of any kind are an important part of recovery and should always be regarded as learning experiences. Have a close look at how it actually came about. There will always be a reason. Did you eat enough at your previous meal? Was it caused by stress or anxiety?

Can you identify an event or interaction that triggered it? The more carefully you think about it, the more you will learn from it. Talking to someone will be very helpful at this point. This will put things in perspective. If this is not the first time it has happened, try to remember what helped you to deal with it the last time.

Remember that in life, experience is your greatest teacher. Try to view any setbacks positively, as signals to help you identify how best to move forward. In this way, you can transform even a setback into a motivating factor instead of letting it defeat you and draw you back into the negative thinking from which you have been working so hard to break free.

Remember that you are aiming to *reduce* the number of times you binge. You are not aiming to never binge again. This means that a slip is only that - a slip. You have not failed in your attempt to binge less. You are not back to square one. Remind yourself of the days when you have been able not to binge. You have been successful in the past and you will be successful again!

**AND REMEMBER, YOU DON'T HAVE TO DO THIS ALONE!**

**USE YOUR SUPPORTS!**

# Helpful Resources

- > Bodywhys **Helpline**: Lo Call **1890 200 444**
- > **Email Support**: [alex@bodywhys.ie](mailto:alex@bodywhys.ie)
- > For details of online support meetings **bodywhysConnect** and support groups, visit [www.bodywhys.ie](http://www.bodywhys.ie)

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- > **Overeaters Anonymous** offer support meetings based on the 12 Step model of recovery. Visit [www.aa.org](http://www.aa.org) for information.

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- > **Obsessive Eaters Anonymous** also offer meetings. Visit [www.obsessiveeatersanonymous.org](http://www.obsessiveeatersanonymous.org) for information.

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- > For information on services available to people with eating disorders, consult the **Bodywhys National Directory of Service Providers** at [www.bodywhys.ie](http://www.bodywhys.ie)

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- > For lists of **helpful books** and **websites**, visit [www.bodywhys.ie](http://www.bodywhys.ie)

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RECOVERY FROM AN EATING DISORDER  
IS ALWAYS POSSIBLE.

REACH OUT AND MAKE IT YOUR REALITY!

**BINGE EATING – BREAKING THE CYCLE**

Food Diary

Time	Description & Quantity	Where	Type of Hunger	Binge? *	Feelings

Physical hunger = Body hunger = BH      Craving = Mouth hunger = MH

Meal Plan

Description	
Meal	
Time	

- Bodywhys Helpline: Lo Call 1890 200 444
- Email Support: [alex@bodywhys.ie](mailto:alex@bodywhys.ie)
- For details of online support meetings  
bodywhysConnect and support groups,  
visit [www.bodywhys.ie](http://www.bodywhys.ie)

## BODYWHYS

The Eating Disorders  
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