

How can I support my family member, friend or loved one with their binge eating difficulty?

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If you are reading this, it is likely that someone you care about is working to overcome a binge eating difficulty. They might be working with a specialist psychological and/or nutritional therapist, or maybe they are using one of the self-help books on the market.

Either way, reducing or stopping binge eating can be very challenging, and many people find that the understanding and support of those close to them can be invaluable as they develop a more enjoyable relationship with food.

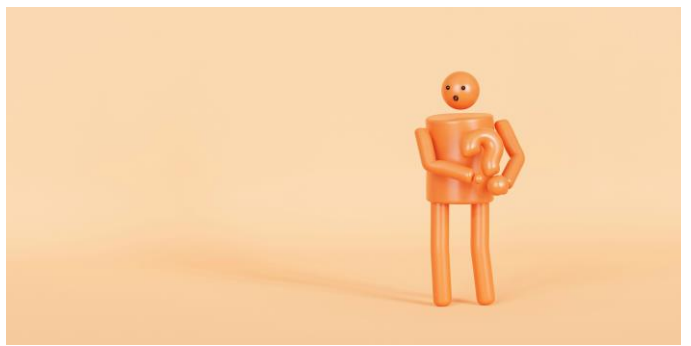
However, it can be difficult for people *without* similar personal experiences to understand the thoughts, feelings, urges and actions of people who binge eat. So it can – understandably – be difficult to offer genuinely helpful support without some relevant information.

This resource sheet aims to provide some key information about binge eating, and some helpful tips about how you may be able to support someone who is working on overcoming this sort of eating difficulty.

This information is designed for those supporting adults without medical issues that may be linked to their eating or nutritional needs, and offers general suggestions only. Everyone is different, so while this may be helpful for a lot of people, it won't be relevant for everyone.

Thank you for being prepared to consider this information in order to help the person you care about!

What is binge eating, and what about binge eating disorder?



Some key points about binge eating and binge eating disorder (BED):

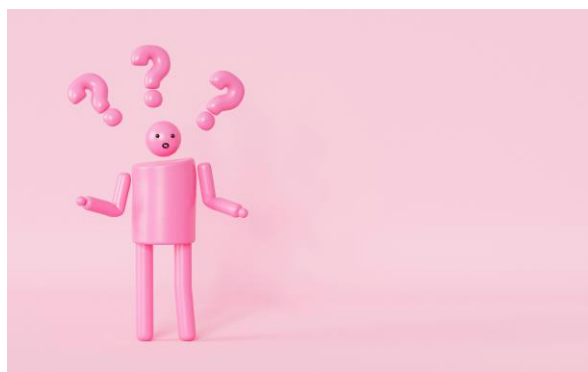
- Binge eating refers to eating a large amount of food in a short period of time, and feeling a **loss of control** regarding this.
- Binge eating is typically accompanied or followed by self-critical thoughts and distressing emotions such as **guilt and shame**.
- If someone has been binge eating at least once a week for at least 3 months, and experiences significant distress about their eating, they *may* meet the current criteria for binge eating disorder (BED).
- People with BED do not use laxatives, self-induce vomiting, or over-exercise – these dangerous so-called “compensation” or “purging” behaviours are associated with different diagnoses.
- Evidence suggests that BED is **the most common of all eating disorders** and that it affects males and females in equal measure. Yet, there is much stigma surrounding BED, so people with this distressing condition often do not seek out or receive the support they deserve and need.

Regardless of whether or not someone has a diagnosis of BED, or any other eating disorder, having a binge eating difficulty can have an extremely negative impact on self-esteem and quality of life.

Unfortunately, a lack of understanding – and harmful messages from the weight loss industry – can lead us to think that people who binge eat should be able to exert some “willpower” and just... stop! That they should eat less, maybe go on a diet, and basically control themselves better...

It can be helpful to remember that binge eating involves a sense of *loss of control* - this is one reason why **it is very difficult to simply stop binge eating**. Further, binge eating is typically about much more than just food or eating. There are often *multiple* other factors at play which maintain a binge eating issue, which may all need to be addressed in some way in order for a person to overcome their binge eating difficulty.

People who binge eat are typically very distressed about their eating and would certainly “just stop” if they could. But this would be like teleporting straight to a longed-for destination, without taking any of the necessary steps to get there – that is, not very realistic!



Should I encourage the person I care about to try a new diet?

This is an understandable consideration when someone you care about is struggling with binge eating, and is perhaps expressing significant distress regarding their eating and body image. However, **it is NOT helpful to suggest or encourage any kind of dieting.**

In fact, dietary advice for a binge eating issue typically includes ending any “dieting” - and instead establishing a regular pattern of eating, with 3 meals plus snacks each day, eating across the food groups, and with no foods deemed “bad” or “forbidden” etc.

Some people may feel that this encourages eating “too much” or the “wrong” foods, so it is important to know that there are good reasons for encouraging eating in this way, and that research supports this approach.

It may also help to know that **dieting is an exceptionally common trigger for binge eating difficulties**, and dieting efforts (even diet related pressures or thoughts) often contribute to causing and maintaining binge eating difficulties.

Also, whilst diets sometimes lead to temporary weight loss, evidence shows they are typically not effective in the long term. Weight is often regained, plus extra, and “weight cycling” (repeated weight losses and gains) can lead to health problems – sometimes the very health problems that are associated simplistically and misleadingly with a higher weight.

So when (often well-meaning) family/friends encourage someone who binge eats to “diet”, they may well be inadvertently making matters worse for the person they care about.

Some, though not all, people choose to address their weight concerns when they have an improved relationship with food. This is an individual choice, and is not a positive option for everyone. **Sometimes people choose not to pursue weight reduction ever again, and this can be both liberating and healthy.**

Sometimes this is because the person has begun to challenge the misleading and discriminative messages embedded within Diet Culture, and has learned about weight-inclusive concepts such as Health At Every Size, Intuitive Eating, and Body Neutrality. It might be useful to the person you care about, therefore, for you learn about some relevant topics such as these as well.

Talking about anything relating to dieting, or body weight/shape, is typically extremely unhelpful – whether referring to the person you care about or someone else – and is often experienced as shaming.

OK, so what **WOULD** be helpful?

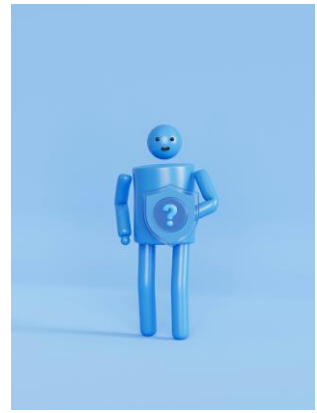


The person you care about may be able to advise you on what would help them. However, here are some “top tips” that commonly help:

- Resist any urges to promote dieting, or dietary restriction, in any form. Diets are often disguised as a “healthy lifestyle” and may claim to be “not a diet”. If there are rules and restrictions, it is likely to be unhelpful at best – and highly triggering at worst.
- Support your friend, family member or loved one to avoid dieting, and to reduce any focus on weight, size/shape or weight loss.
- Be careful about what you say to/around the person you care about regarding your own relationship with food and eating... People often find it unhelpful and distressing when their friends or loved ones talk about their own weight, weight loss, dieting, etc.
- Don’t express negative judgement about people in larger bodies, nor praise those in slim bodies or who have lost weight.
- Don’t try to discourage the person you care about from eating foods that they have chosen to eat. Developing a better relationship with food often depends on overcoming the idea that there are “good” and “bad” foods, and on feeling able to enjoy all food groups and types – in combinations and quantities that are satisfying.
- Don’t try and persuade the person you care about to eat foods that they have chosen not to eat, or to have “seconds” if they don’t want to, etc. It can be helpful to respect their decisions regarding their intake and accept “no thank you” without pressure.
- Recognise that anyone who is working to overcome a binge eating difficulty is undertaking a challenging task and that some emotional or practical support may be helpful. Again, the person you care about may be able to tell you what would be especially helpful (or unhelpful) for them.
- Take a non-judgemental and understanding attitude. Clients often mention that feeling accepted, rather than judged or criticised, is helpful.
- Sometimes, just letting the person you care about know that you care, and that you are there for them, is very helpful indeed – and may be all the support that is required.

Some of this can be challenging, because it can require looking at one’s own engrained beliefs about weight and related issues. Engaging in some relevant reading or gaining support for yourself can sometimes be helpful.

Anything else I should know?



Overcoming an eating difficulty often involves addressing many factors and is a gradual process. Slips or setbacks are normal and do not mean that attempts to change are hopeless ... they can even be good learning opportunities.

That said, if someone is struggling to improve their relationship with food, it is possible that the approach they are using is not a good match for them. It is useful, then, to know that there are different paths to take when working on overcoming binge eating.

A lot of people try to “go it alone”, perhaps using a self-help book, but a great deal of people find that this is not enough. Equally, many people find that interventions offered by their local eating disorder services are not a good match for their needs. Understandably, such methods can take a generalising stance on overcoming an eating difficulty, and may not always take into account important issues relevant to the individual. Further, they are often only able to offer short-term support.

In some cases, working with a private psychologist, or another suitable professional, with specialist training and experience in disordered eating, can be a good investment.

Sometimes family members, friends and loved ones struggle to see this as a valuable use of time and finances, when other options are free. It can be useful, then, to understand that such an approach can provide a thorough and tailored way for someone to tackle many or all of the factors that have played a role in causing and maintaining their eating difficulty.

Those supporting someone with recovery from disordered eating may benefit from some support for themselves. This can be helpful both for themselves, and for the person they care about.

My website provides some signposting that may be helpful:

www.eatinpeace.co.uk

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