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# BINGE EATING

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**Binge-eating is defined as the consumption of an unusually large amount of food within a relatively short period of time (e.g. two hours) in a way that feels out of control. Eating more than usual for a special-occasion meal or during the holidays is not binge-eating.**

**nedic**

**National Eating Disorder Information Centre**

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**[www.nedic.ca](http://www.nedic.ca)**

**Binge-eating disorder** is a formally-recognized eating disorder characterized by recurrent episodes of binge-eating that involve three or more of the following:

- Eating very quickly
- Eating regardless of hunger cues, even if one is already full
- Eating until uncomfortably or painfully full
- Eating alone due to embarrassment about the quantity of food ingested
- Feelings of self-disgust, guilt, or depression

Affected individuals experience significant distress regarding their eating behaviours. In general, the binge-eating episodes are not followed by behaviours to compensate for the food consumed, such as vomiting or exercising intensely, but it is common for those with binge-eating disorder to diet repeatedly.

Binge-eating is also one of the primary symptoms of bulimia nervosa and the binge-eating/purging subtype of anorexia nervosa.

### WHO IS AFFECTED?

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Many people have difficulties with binge-eating at some point in their life. Binge-eating disorder is the most common eating disorder – it is estimated that 2% of people experience symptoms sufficient for a diagnosis in their lifetime. People of all ages, genders, socioeconomic classes, racial backgrounds, ethnicities, and abilities can be affected.

### POSSIBLE TRIGGERS

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Binge-eating is a complex behaviour with multiple contributing factors. Chronic restrictive eating or inadequate energy (calorie) intake are common precursors to bingeing. As the human body is adapted for survival, when it is deprived of energy from food, mechanisms to defend against starvation and maintain its set-point weight are activated. Restrictive eating very often takes the form of weight-loss dieting. A person who wants to lose weight may attempt to keep their energy intake low by eating very small meals, which they may succeed in doing during the day, but in the evening may be overcome by intense cravings or hunger that lead to bingeing. Emotional stress can further increase vulnerability to bingeing in a person whose body is deprived of adequate energy. Trying to follow strict dietary rules that needlessly call for the avoidance of certain foods may also eventually lead to binge-eating those foods. For some individuals, binge-eating may serve as a way of coping with intense emotions.

Emotional situations that may lead to binge-eating include:

- Feeling isolated or disconnected from others
- Major life stressors, e.g., loss of a partner, loss of one's job, health issues, trauma
- Not spending enough time on self-care or ensuring one's own needs are met
- Experiencing an intense negative emotion (e.g., anxiety, sadness, guilt, shame, anger)

Risk factors that have been identified for the development of binge-eating disorder include:

- Personal history of high body mass index during childhood and weight-related teasing
- Parental history of disordered eating behaviours such as dieting and overeating
- Difficulties with emotion regulation, particularly when exposed to stress

### EMOTIONAL CONSEQUENCES

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The emotional consequences of binge-eating episodes can be very distressing for an individual and can include feelings of:

- Helplessness
- Loneliness
- Guilt
- Regret
- Shame
- Bewilderment

### COUNSELLING AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

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Counselling and psychotherapy are often helpful in overcoming binge-eating and food and weight preoccupation in general. Cognitive behavioural therapy is well established as the leading approach to treating binge-eating. It is important to address any food and weight concern that interferes with living a full and healthy life. NEDIC has a national directory of professionals experienced in this work – you can contact us for referrals.

### HOW CAN I HELP MYSELF IF I HAVE DIFFICULTIES WITH BINGE-EATING?

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- Talk to someone you trust about the role that food has in your emotional life.
- Stop assigning moral values to foods. Instead of restricting foods that you have labelled “bad” or “junk” from your diet, give yourself permission to eat all types of foods. Aim to eat a variety of foods that you enjoy and that leave you feeling well-nourished.
- Don’t go on weight loss or unnecessary food elimination diets. Remember that restrictive eating often leads to binge-eating because our bodies sense that they are being starved, and so try to defend themselves. Dieting also perpetuates feelings of emotional deprivation and the false belief that through self-denial and looking like the “cultural ideal” we will achieve happiness and success.
- Learn to recognize and understand the underlying emotions that accompany your particular eating patterns.
- Listen to your body and its messages about hunger and satisfaction.
- Find healthy ways to nurture yourself emotionally and physically, e.g., have a relaxing bath, or spend time with good friends.
- Take a closer look at your interpersonal relationships and work on changing those that you notice are characterized by conflict.
- Be kind to yourself. Try to find compassion and understanding for the ideas, events, and emotions that make you feel most ashamed.

### HOW CAN I HELP SOMEONE WHO HAS DIFFICULTIES WITH BINGE-EATING?

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- Seek credible information about eating disorders and the risks of dieting, and learn as much as you can – the more you know, the more you can help.
- Let the individual know you are concerned and willing to provide support.
- Find out where the individual can go for help and encourage them to seek it.
- Provide the individual with information to help them understand the impacts of binge-eating and dieting on their social, emotional, and physical well-being.
- Be patient. Overcoming an eating problem can be a lengthy process.
- Avoid focusing on appearance or weight. Instead, talk about concerning behaviours you have observed.
- Understand your limits and take care of yourself. Role-model healthy attitudes and behaviours.
- Address food- and weight-related prejudices in yourself and others.
- Support organizations like NEDIC which can do the work that you alone cannot.

#### National Eating Disorder Information Centre

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