

Eating Disorders in Prisons

A Guide for
Prison Staff



How to
recognise the
signs and
what you can
do to help.



I work in a prison

I want to know more about eating disorders and how they present in prison services

I would like to help people with eating disorders and advocate for them

I would like contact details for eating disorder organisations

Then this booklet is for you!

Any research or evidence quoted is continuously advancing and any language used in this asset is not intended to stigmatise or trigger. If you're affected by anything in this resource, seek help from your GP and primary care team.



Eating Disorders

An eating disorder is a mental health condition characterised by persistent disturbances in eating behaviours and deficits in physical and mental health. [1]

This booklet will cover the 3 most commonly known eating disorders:

For information on other eating disorders, refer to the resource list at the back of this booklet.

Anorexia Nervosa [2]

Extreme fear of weight gain

Distorted self-perception

Restriction of food to lose weight to unhealthy levels

Binge Eating Disorder [3]

Regularly eating large amounts of food without control over actions

Guilt and shame after bingeing

Eating when not hungry

Bulimia Nervosa [4]

Cycle of bingeing and purging

Purging by inducing vomiting, using laxatives/diuretics, or exercise

Fear of gaining weight

Over 3.3 million lives are lost to eating disorders every year. 20% of these deaths are suicides. [5]



Warning Signs



There are multiple warning signs that might indicate the presence of an eating disorder. These can be separated into 3 categories:

Behavioural [6]

Fasting.
Eating extremely quickly or slowly.
Hiding food.
Frequent body checking.
Leaving the room quickly after eating.
Excessive exercise.

Cognitive [7]

Black-and-white thinking.
Preoccupation with food.
Perfectionism.
Rigid thinking around food (including food rituals).
Distraction.

Emotional [8]

Agitation around meal times.
Guilt or shame after eating.
Withdrawn.
Mood swings.
Suicidal ideation.
Low self-esteem.

There are some warning signs unique to prisons, which are crucial to be aware of.

- Hoarding or hiding food
- Trading or bartering for food with other inmates
- Unexplained weight loss or gain
- Excessive exercise outside of “outdoor exercise” time
- Food related conflicts with other inmates such as stealing

Eating Disorders in Prisons

25% of the prison population are identified as “at risk” of eating disorders [9]

20% of prisoners are diagnosed with eating disorders [10]

But MANY more go undiagnosed and unnoticed.

Eating disorders cause many adverse affects for the sufferer.

Physical ^[11] Consequences	Mental Health ^[12] Consequences	Social ^[13] Consequences
Nutritional deficiencies	Suicidal ideation	Isolation and social withdrawal
Dental complications	Depression and anxiety	Stigma and discrimination
Cardiovascular problems	Poor self-esteem and body image	Interpersonal conflict

How Does Prison Contribute to Eating Disorders?

Prison environments can contribute to eating disorder development in a number of ways.

The general stressors of a prison environment create vulnerability to mental health difficulties and harmful coping mechanisms. [14]

- Coping mechanisms could include restricting food intake or binge eating - which are both symptoms of eating disorders. [15]

In prison, people lose the control they have over their own lives. Inmates may try to find and demonstrate control over one aspect of their lives that is still available to them - eating. [16]

Also, inmates ability to express themselves is taken away. This can lead to negative feelings about the body [17], known as “body dissatisfaction”.



Control plays a role in many eating disorders, whether this is a loss of control during binge episodes, or control over calorie intake. [18]

Body dissatisfaction is a major risk factor for eating disorders, as people try to reduce dissatisfaction using disordered eating behaviours. [19]

Recognising Diversity

When thinking about eating disorders in prisons, it is important to consider the range of ethnicities, cultures, religions and genders that may experience things differently.

Not everyone will respond well to the same approach!



For example, gender non-conforming people face very different challenges with body image, such as gender dysphoria - the feeling of your gender not matching your bodily characteristics [20].

- There may be more barriers to seeking help for transgender and non-binary individuals, such as fear of stigmatisation and discrimination [21].
- This is especially true in prisons, where inmates are extremely vulnerable to hate crimes, and may lack the means to report such events.



If you're not sure - ask!

Facilitating open and honest communication is the best way to support individuals from diverse backgrounds with eating concerns.

Everyone deserves access to equal care and support.

How to Report and What You Can Do

As someone who works in a prison, you have a unique responsibility to advocate for those under your supervision!

Report your concerns to relevant authorities, such as mental health professionals or medical staff trained to address mental health and wellness issues. You may do this anonymously if you wish - the most important part is that help can reach the inmate.

Be a listening ear: be someone willing to listen to inmate concerns and encourage communication.

Advocate: stand up for prisoner's rights to resources, treatment and adequate nutrition.

Educate yourself and others on the intricacies of eating disorders, and how they manifest in prison environments.

Follow-up on reported concerns to ensure that the inmate is getting the help they need.



And Remember!

Reporting concerns about eating disorders can save lives and contribute to the well-being of individuals within the prison community.

Your actions can make a difference in helping individuals receive the support and treatment they need to overcome eating disorders and achieve recovery.

Contacts and Further Information

First Steps to Understanding Eating Disorders

Early intervention, referrals for support and information.

<https://firststepsed.co.uk>

0300 1021 685

[22]



Beat Eating Disorders

Helplines and email & messaging support services. Information and resources.

<https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk>

[23]

0808 801 0677: 3pm-8pm Mon-Fri



Samaritans

24/7 helplines for mental health support.

<https://www.samaritans.org>

0330 094 5717

[24]



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