

UNDERSTANDING EATING DISORDERS



This is an excerpt from a longer Waiting List Booklet provided to service users in the East London Community Eating Disorder Service (Adults). The service supports adults aged 18+ who are experiencing an intense and distressing preoccupation with food, weight or shape that is significantly impacting their life.

If you live in Newham, Tower Hamlets, or City & Hackney, you can reach out for help via our [self referral form](#).

2.1 What are eating disorders?

Eating disorders are a **serious mental health condition** in which people use disordered eating behaviours as a way to **cope with difficult situations or feelings**. Disordered eating behaviours can include restricting food intake, feeling a loss of control around eating or eating a very large amount at once, self-induced vomiting, misusing laxatives, or excessive exercise.

Many people will experience a mix of symptoms, and it is **common to move between different**

behaviours at different times.

Unfortunately, there are still a lot of common misunderstandings about eating disorders in society. **Eating disorders can affect anyone** of any age, gender, size, ethnicity or background. They do not have a specific 'look' and the vast **majority of people with an eating disorder are not underweight**. While eating disorders do involve an intense preoccupation with food – and often also body shape or weight – they are **not superficial or a 'choice'**.

Disordered eating

Disordered eating is a descriptive term for irregular eating behaviours relating to feelings of distress, which may or may not meet the criteria for an eating disorder diagnosis. People with disordered eating struggle with **many of the same thoughts, feelings and behaviours as those with diagnosable eating disorders**. As with eating disorders, people struggling with disordered eating are **deserving of timely and compassionate support**.



[Learn more about eating disorders & disordered eating](#)

"Coming from a Turkish cultural background in the 1980s we did not discuss eating disorders at home or at school. We just didn't. I didn't know that I had an eating disorder until I was 28, and it took me a lot longer to tell my family and friends."

"People think it's as simple as stopping or starting to eat, or just hitting the gym. It's so much harder than that, and explaining it isn't always easy."



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**“Please never compare yourself
to other service users.**

There are many eating disorders that present with different physical and behavioural symptoms. Your weight does not determine the severity of your eating problems, because all EDs are serious mental health conditions that can have a significant impact on a person’s life.

It is also important not to compare your personal circumstances or past experiences to any other patient. Your story is just as important and valid as any other.

YOU must concentrate on YOU, because YOU are important; YOU are deserving; YOU have a serious eating disorder; and YOU need help and support to recover.

Realising this was a fundamental turning point in my recovery journey.”

**Watch/listen:
Rosie’s Story –
Mental state, not just weight**

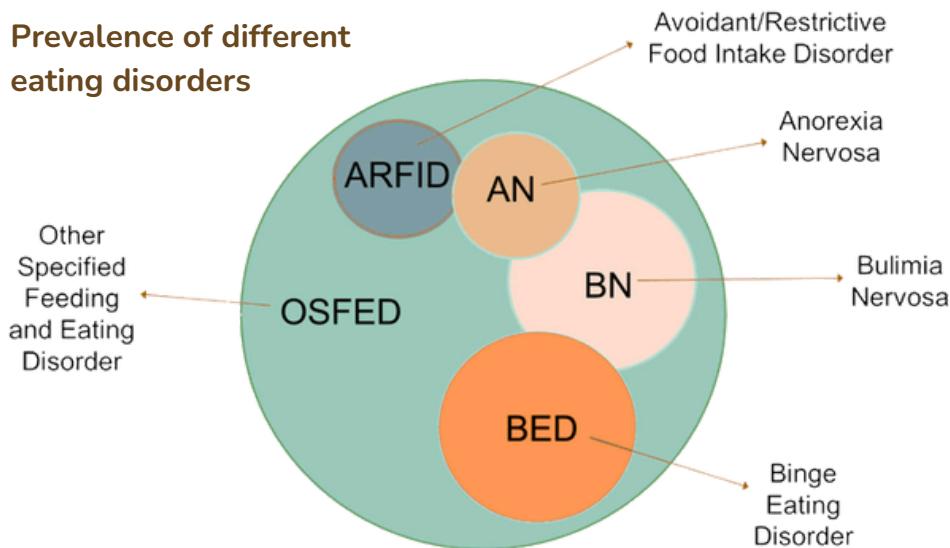
2.2 Different types of eating disorder

There are several different types of eating disorder diagnosis, all of which involve a **distressing relationship with food** and eating. These diagnoses are a way of grouping **different combinations of symptoms** together, so that healthcare professionals can think about what kind of treatment someone might need. In our service we use the different diagnostic categories as a **starting point for understanding** your experiences and identifying how we can best

help you, although we do not offer formal diagnoses. Follow the links to read more.

- [Anorexia Nervosa](#)
- [ARFID](#)
- [Binge Eating Disorder](#)
- [Bulimia Nervosa](#)
- [Orthorexia](#)
- [OSFED](#)
- [Pica](#)

Prevalence of different eating disorders



OSFED and Binge Eating Disorder are the most commonly seen eating disorders.

How helpful is diagnosis?

Some people can find diagnostic labels very helpful for **understanding more about their own experiences**, and may feel a sense of relief and validation in finding a name for their struggles. However, there is often a lot of **overlap between different eating disorders**, which can make it difficult for some people to find a diagnosis that they can completely relate to. This is **very common**: in fact, the highest percentage of eating disorder diagnoses are classed as OSFED*, an umbrella term for **patterns of eating disorder symptoms that don't exactly fit the criteria for any one eating disorder**.

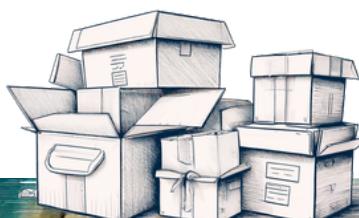
"I didn't really believe I had an eating disorder for years, because I had such a mix of different symptoms that didn't fall under any one label."

It is also common for people's symptoms to **move back and forth between diagnostic categories**. As

a result, some people may find it more helpful to think about their experiences in more general 'eating disorder' or 'disordered eating' terms.

"I wish I had known that the eating disorder professionals would have seen experiences like mine many times before, and that most people are not 'textbook'."

It's important that you feel able to define your experiences in a way that feels right for you. If you feel unsure about why certain language or labels are being used in your treatment, or if the subject of diagnosis is bringing up difficult feelings for you, we encourage you to raise this with your therapist during your sessions.



*Other Specified Feeding or Eating Disorder

“When I first sought support, I felt like a fraud as I didn’t experience Binge Eating Disorder in the way media, and perhaps even some health professionals portrayed it. I ate three regular meals a day, I didn’t have binging episodes that went on for hours and I never purged.

However, the therapist who carried out my assessment made it very clear that my eating patterns and reasons for eating the way I did warranted therapy. Likewise, my therapist never questioned my need for therapy.”

“There’s still such a lack of awareness that this is something that men can – and do – experience too. But there are lots of us out there.”

Read more about experiences of eating disorders ‘Beyond the Stereotypes’ in our [Lived Experience Guide](#)



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“Please NEVER give up on yourself or write yourself off, even if you feel like others have.

‘It does not matter how long you have been living with your eating disorder, because one day you may feel differently and be ready to let go.’

‘I wish I had done it sooner and enjoyed a life without the ED ball and chain around my neck.

But I am forever grateful for where I am today and intend on making the most of my life moving forwards.

I know you can too.”

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Personal stories

The challenges, things that helped, and why it was worth keeping going with recovery - listen to more stories from people who have ‘been there’ on our [website](#).