

A man with a beard, wearing a blue button-down shirt, is sitting at a desk in an office, focused on his laptop. The desk is cluttered with various items including a pen holder, a smartphone, and some papers. In the background, two other people are visible, one standing and one sitting, in a bright, modern office environment with large windows.

Eating Disorders in the Workplace

Information for employers and
HR professionals

Eating Disorders in the Workplace

Around 2% of the UK working population experience an eating disorder, yet it's something that's rarely spoken about – particularly in the workplace.

We've taken significant strides in opening up about mental health at work, and this progress should be celebrated. But workplace initiatives often overlook eating disorders, despite the impact they can have.

Eating disorders are serious and complex mental illnesses that require time, patience and unwavering support to overcome. It's crucial that employers take steps to learn more about their impact and how to support those affected.

Only through education, understanding and open conversation in the workplace will the stigma surrounding eating disorders begin to break.

In this guide, we'll cover the basics; what eating disorders are, what they are not, and how employers and HR professionals can start to create more supportive workplaces for those who are struggling. This is our contribution to **Eating Disorder Awareness Week 2021**.



Laura Dallas
WELLBEING LEAD



Anorexia Nervosa

[Anorexia](#) is a serious mental illness. Those experiencing anorexia try to keep their body weight low by restricting food or over-exercising, which is accompanied by an intense fear of gaining weight and distorted perception about body size or image.

It's also common for individuals to develop certain rules and fears around particular foods, and go to great lengths to hide their behaviour from family, friends and colleagues.

Low mood and anxiety are common in those with anorexia, along with withdrawal from social situations. The physical effects of starvation can also have a number of short and long-term effects on the body, from tiredness and poor concentration, to osteoporosis and heart failure.

Bulimia Nervosa

Those affected by [bulimia nervosa](#) often feel like they lose control over their eating. They can find themselves caught in a cycle of bingeing and purging, where they eat a large amount of food and then compensate by vomiting or taking laxatives in order to avoid weight gain.

Like anorexia, bulimia can come to dominate daily life and significantly impact a person's physical and mental health. Those with bulimia tend to have low self-esteem and depression, and experience unpleasant physical symptoms like abdominal pain, swollen cheeks and dental issues. Purging regularly can also cause damage to the heart.

Binge Eating Disorder (BED)

[BED](#), like bulimia and anorexia, is a serious mental illness. Those affected experience a loss of control and regularly consume large quantities of food in a short period of time, often eating when they're not hungry. People may experience guilt or disgust after bingeing, but unlike bulimia nervosa, people do not feel compelled to purge or fast to control their weight.

Those affected may have low self-esteem, low confidence, depression and anxiety. It can also lead to obesity and other related symptoms, like high blood pressure and heart disease.

Types of eating disorder

Eating disorders are complex and deserve more insight than we can provide below, so follow the links for more information from Beat, the UK's national eating disorder charity.

Other Specified Feeding or Eating Disorder (OSFED)

Sometimes, a person's experiences don't fit the specific criteria associated with anorexia, bulimia or BED. In this case, they might be diagnosed with another type of eating disorder (sometimes referred to as [OSFED](#)).

This is actually very common, and accounts for the majority of eating disorders experienced. But despite not meeting the above criteria, symptoms are just as serious and can have a significant impact on an individual's mental and physical health.



1.25 million
people in the UK
have an eating
disorder

Around **25%**
experiencing an
eating disorder
are male

Around **6%**
of adults
show signs of
an eating
disorder

Source: Beat Eating Disorders,
UK National Charity

Common myths

Myth

Eating disorders aren't serious

Truth

Eating disorders are serious and complex illnesses, and have a significant impact on an individual's life. In fact, anorexia nervosa has the highest mortality rate of any psychiatric disorder. But whilst treating an eating disorder can be difficult and often requires specialist treatment, recovery is possible with the right support.

Myth

Eating disorders are all about food

Truth

Food plays a part in an eating disorder, but it's not the whole story. Food should instead be thought of as a symptom of something else going on in someone's life. For many, it's used as a coping mechanism when things are difficult, providing a sense of control or distraction from difficult emotions. This complexity means eating disorders cannot be solved by simply eating more.

Myth

Eating disorders are a 'teenage girl' problem

Truth

Eating disorders don't discriminate. Anyone can experience an eating disorder, regardless of their age, gender, ethnicity or life experience. But sadly, those who don't fit the stereotypical image are often overlooked, misdiagnosed and don't get the support they need.

Myths and stereotypes can make it less likely for individuals to come forward for help, so it's important we tackle them.

Myth

You have to be underweight to have an eating disorder

Truth

You don't have to look a certain way to have an eating disorder. An eating disorder affects the mind before the body, so weight is not an indication of how unwell a person is. Most people with an eating disorder are either a 'healthy' weight or 'overweight'.

Myth

Recovery from an eating disorder is not possible

Truth

With the right support and treatment, recovery is possible. But for the best chance of recovery, a holistic approach is best - it shouldn't just be about weight restoration or food intake, but also psychological and emotional support.

The Impact in the workplace

The severity of an eating disorder means it can impact every aspect of a person's life, including work. With 6% of adults showing some signs of an eating disorder, it's important to understand the wider-reaching effects they can have, to ensure timely support is put in place.

These effects can include:

Reduced productivity and performance due to:

- > Fatigue and poor concentration
- > A preoccupation with food or weight and rigid thought patterns
- > Other mental and physical health problems

Difficulty integrating with the team or withdrawing from social situations

Serious long-term health effects, which can result in longer sickness absences

If inpatient treatment is required, absence could extend from months to over a year

This is why early-intervention and specialist treatment are vital to supporting the employees in your workplace struggling with an eating disorder.



Tips for employers

1 Know the signs

Recognising the warning signs is a key step to offering support when someone needs it. Although people with eating disorders can be secretive and hide their difficulties from those around them, there are some signs you might notice in the workplace:

- > Changes in weight, obsession with food or a distorted body image
- > Difficulties concentrating, or a noticeable difference in productivity
- > Perfectionist traits, low self-esteem and a high-level of self-criticism
- > Avoidance of workplace events where food might be present
- > Evidence of purging, such as going to the bathroom right after eating
- > Frequent sick days

2 Be open and approachable

We're all trying to build a workplace environment where employees are comfortable expressing their concerns and struggles. As an employer, being open and approachable will help to improve communication with your employees, making it easier for those with an eating disorder – or any mental health difficulty – to open up.

3 Share your concerns

If you are worried about someone in your team, it's important to open up the conversation and share your concerns respectfully. Remember to listen, show empathy and be mindful of the language you use – a lot of shame surrounds eating disorders so it's important to be non-judgemental and avoid playing into any stereotypes.

It can also be helpful to familiarise yourself with the support available before having this conversation (both internally through Occupational Health or externally through local services or charities like Beat).

4 Follow up

If the person has opened up about their eating disorder, take the time to check in and follow up. Be sensitive, don't pry and use your judgement to ask appropriate questions. This shows you're looking out for them and reminds them that you're there to offer support.

**Support from
the experts**

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Support from the experts

Use this guide as a starting point and continue by exploring resources from the charities dedicated to supporting those affected by eating disorders.

And keep in mind, whether in the workplace or at home, you must seek professional help if you – or someone you know – needs urgent support.



-  www.b-eat.co.uk
-  Helpline – 0345 634 141
-  help@b-eat.co.uk

-  www.eating-disorders.org.uk
-  Helpline – 0845 838 2040



-  Overeaters Anonymous
-  www.oagb.org.uk

-  www.anorexiabulimiare.org.uk
-  Helpline – 03000 11 12 13



-  www.mind.org.uk
-  Helpline – 08457 660163
-  info@mind.org.uk

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