



Help and support for an eating disorder

This is our guide to seeking help for an eating disorder. It includes step-by-step information on how to seek eating disorder treatment, tips for talking to friends and family, and details of self-help resources.

We know it can be really hard to reach out for help. However, the sooner you seek help, the sooner things can start to get better.

You don't have to take our word for it. This guide was developed jointly by clinicians and young adults with experience of eating disorder treatment. They know what it is like to be struggling with an eating disorder alone and share their advice throughout the guide.

"I genuinely never thought I could feel this OK around food and the like. It just shows that you never know how capable you are of getting better until you try and can get the help you need."

FREED service user

"An eating disorder is the most lonely thing in the world. It doesn't have to be. Ask for help!"

FREED service user



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Seeking eating disorder treatment

Seeing your General Practitioner (GP)

Some eating disorder services allow self-referral but most will need a referral from your GP.

Even if self-referral is possible, most eating disorder services will want to let your GP know that you are seeing them receiving treatment and will ask you to attend for a physical health check-up.

This means that if you are thinking about eating disorder treatment, a sensible first step is to book an appointment with your GP.

You might want to book the appointment when you are feeling brave, even if you're not 100% sure you want to attend.

If there is a doctor at your practice you are most comfortable with, you can ask to meet with them. You can also ask to see a female or male doctor according to your preference. Some GPs do special clinics for young people.

When planning for the appointment, you may want to consider:

- Is there someone you trust who could come with you? It might feel daunting to talk to family or friends about your eating difficulties, but then they can support you at the appointment. (See our section later in this guide on talking to friends and family.)
- Think about what you will tell your doctor and what you will ask them for. You may want to take this guide with you or refer to the FREED webpage. We recommend asking your GP to refer you for eating disorder treatment.
- It may be helpful to write down your eating disorder symptoms so you can share these with your doctor. If you find it difficult in the session you can show them your list. Remember that eating disorder symptoms include thoughts and feelings as well as behaviours and physical changes.
- You may also want to write down some questions for your GP. These could include asking about the local eating disorder service and what will happen next.
- Your GP will probably want to measure your height and weight. We know this can be stressful if you have an eating disorder. You can have an eating disorder at any size, but it is important for your doctor to measure height and weight as part of checking your overall health and making an eating disorder referral. You can ask not to see your weight if you prefer.
- Your GP may also take your blood pressure, pulse and temperature as part of assessing your physical health. They may send you for some blood tests.



Doctors are trained to understand mental health difficulties, including eating disorders. They should be sympathetic towards your difficulties and do their best to support you and help you access specialist care. If they don't, you can ask to see a different doctor.

"To recover you have got to be brave: it involves taking risks, and tolerating uncertainty and set-backs."

Ulrike Schmidt, Consultant Psychiatrist and Professor of Eating Disorders

"I waited so long to seek treatment because I was worried I wasn't sick enough, and was so anxious about what it would involve. It took a few sessions before I started to relax but it was the best thing I ever did. I missed out on so much of my first year at university because of my eating disorder. I wish I'd got help sooner - so if you're like I was, don't wait!!"

FREED service user

I'm talking to you

I'm talking to you
You who woke up this morning to another day of cruel rules
I'm talking to you
You who exercised in secret before a breakfast you didn't allow yourself to eat
I'm talking to you
You with the constant internal argument that screams in silence
I'm talking to you
You who is too embarrassed, ashamed and anxious to let any one in
I'm talking to you
You who knows, deep down, that it shouldn't be like this
I'm talking to you
You who looks at everyone else and wonders how do they do it?
I'm talking to you
Will you talk to me?

Get early help

 [@freedfromed](https://twitter.com/freedfromed)
www.freedfromed.co.uk
[#reachout](https://twitter.com/freedfromed)



The first session ('assessment appointment') at an Eating Disorder Service

Once your referral reaches the eating disorder service, you may receive a phone call, text, email or letter to arrange an initial meeting or 'assessment session'. Sometimes the service will want more information from you or your doctor. Occasionally they may say that they are not the right service for your needs. If this happens they should offer advice on who else may be able to help.

If your local eating disorder service offers FREED or another early intervention pathway, you should be seen soon after your referral is received. However, different services have different processes and sometimes GP referrals are reviewed by a specialist panel before being sent on. Your GP may be able to tell you the likely timeline in your area.

When you are offered an assessment appointment, this will usually be for one to two hours. The meeting is a chance to talk about what is bothering you and what you would like help with. Usually you will meet with one or two clinicians who are specialists in eating disorders. They will try to make you feel at ease and will understand if you are nervous. There will be time for you to outline your difficulties and ask questions.

The first session will probably cover the following areas:

- Your current eating routines (including any under-eating, over-eating, binge eating and vomiting/laxative misuse)
- Your thoughts and feelings about eating, weight and shape
- Any exercise routines
- When you first developed difficulties with eating, weight and shape and how difficulties have changed over time
- Any difficulties with low mood, anxiety, deliberate self-harm or other mental health concerns
- Drug and alcohol use, if applicable
- Your physical health
- Your weight and weight history
- Your personal background (e.g., schooling, interests) and family structure
- A physical examination covering weight and height, blood pressure, pulse, temperature and key blood tests.

Usually, you will also discuss treatment options and possible next steps for after the meeting. However, sometimes the clinician will need to discuss your care plan with colleagues.

Most eating disorder services have a wait between the initial assessment and treatment starting. You can ask about how long this is likely to be.



Remember, attending an assessment can be a chance to clarify for yourself the nature of your difficulties and what you would like to happen. It doesn't mean that you are committing to treatment but is a chance to get more information on the support that could be available to you.

Information you share in the assessment (and with any health professional) will always be treated as confidential.

"Following a referral from my GP and some blood tests, I had an initial session in one of the therapy rooms at the hospital with a clinical psychologist. This duration of the session was around an hour long, and after giving some context on the problem which I was facing, I was asked to give the particulars of this problem; i.e. my diet on an average day, my bingeing habits, my relationship with exercise, alcohol, drugs, and the history of this problem. We then delved into the mental and emotional issues surrounding my problem, i.e. how I perceived my body and the impact of this problem on my social life, family life, career etc. We also considered its potential causes in alignment to significant events taking place in my life."

Hannah, FREED service user

[Read Hannah's full story](#)

"I had kept my bulimia, anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts a secret from most of my friends, family and colleagues for such a long time. Choosing to go to a FREED assessment and then have CBT treatment was incredibly hard. It wasn't easy, but with time I challenged my eating and slowly recovered. I have no words to describe how grateful I am for that."

FREED service user



Starting eating disorder treatment

There have been lots of studies to identify the best treatment options for eating disorders. You may be reassured to know that most patients with eating disorders receive outpatient help – that is, attending appointments once per week rather than staying in a hospital.

Recommended treatments for eating disorders are different versions of psychological therapies. Psychological therapy involves meeting with a therapist (individually or with a group) to work on the factors that are keeping your eating disorder going. It is “talking therapy” and you and your therapist will work together to help you make changes. You will be given exercises or tasks to complete in between your sessions.

The NICE recommended psychological therapies for eating disorders include:

- Cognitive Behavioural Therapy that specifically focuses on eating disorder symptoms (CBT-ED) – this is suitable for all eating disorders
- Maudsley Model Anorexia Nervosa Treatment for Adults (MANTRA) – suitable for anorexia nervosa
- Specialist Supportive Clinical Management (SSCM) – suitable for anorexia nervosa
- Interpersonal psychotherapy – for bulimia nervosa if CBT-ED is not helpful
- Cognitive Analytic Therapy (CAT) – for all eating disorders as an alternative to other approaches
- Family-Based Therapy (FBT) – suitable for children and adolescents with eating disorders

Dietician input can be helpful in combination with one of the above therapies, but is not recommended as a stand-alone treatment. Similarly, certain medications (like anti-depressants) can be helpful in combination with one of the above therapies, but are not recommended as a stand-alone treatment.

For bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorder, guided self-help and group-based treatments are recommended. Many people find the social support offered in group treatment to be helpful.

Usually sessions are held weekly at the start of treatment but may become less frequent at the end. Individual sessions are usually 50 minutes long whereas group sessions may last for 90 minutes. Treatment usually spans at least 3 months and may be up to a year. Many services offer evening appointments but you are entitled to time off work or study for medical care.

It can take time to trust your therapist and feel comfortable with treatment. Remember that your therapist is there to help you and is used to working with the whole range of eating disorder difficulties.

Therapy is not about blaming you or anyone else for your problems. The focus will mostly be on the "here and now" rather than dwelling too much on events in your past.

"Everyone is nervous before their first appointment, but most leave the session relieved that they have taken that first step."

Amy Brown, Clinical Psychologist

"Therapy is like learning to drive a car... You learn in session and practice in between."

Omara Naseem, Counselling Psychologist

"I didn't think before starting therapy that it would actually make a difference to my problems - it completely surpassed my expectations. I genuinely feel I have the tools to beat my eating disorder now."

FREED service user

Talking to friends and family

Many people with eating disorders keep their difficulties a secret. If this is you, it may feel daunting to think about opening up to family or friends. Alternatively, you may have people who know about your eating disorder but still find it hard to talk openly to them.

Talking to other people about your eating difficulties can allow them to help and support you. It also means that you don't have to hide how you feel and keep your difficulties a secret.

There is no "one size fits all" approach to talking to others. However, here are some things that may help:

- Consider who you will talk to. Who do you feel closest to? Is there anyone in your family or friendship group that seems particularly sensitive to mental health difficulties, or who has struggled themselves? The person you talk to first doesn't have to be the person you spend most time with. Sometimes it is a teacher or colleague that you think will understand and be able to help.
- Plan what you'd like to say. You may want to make some notes. What do you want them to know? Is there anything you want to ask them for help with?
- Plan when you will talk to them. It is best to find a time when you won't be rushed or interrupted.
- Remember that you are in charge of who you tell and how much information you share.

If you are worried that your family or friends won't know much about eating disorders, you may want to give them some information. You could direct them to the FREED website at www.freedfromed.co.uk or the website for Beat, the UK eating disorder charity at www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk.

Most people find that sharing their difficulties is a big relief and that others are sympathetic, encouraging and supportive. However, if the person you speak to first doesn't respond the way you'd hoped, try not to give up.

It may be that you need to try a few times to find the person who understands and can support you.

*"Opening up to a person
you trust is the first step
towards recovery."*

Ulrike Schmidt, Consultant
Psychiatrist and Professor of
Eating Disorders

*"I can completely understand the
nerves. Eating disorders make you feel
really lonely and on your own, so to bring
people very close to you into it is a challenge,
it's hard...but it's never going to be as bad
as what you think. Your parents, your close
ones, relatives, carers, whatever are such a
big part of your life that just having them on
board is perhaps the most valuable thing
you can ask for in recovery. Even though
it's a really scary, big step, just get it done!
Then you can move on from it and they can
support you from that point on."*

Olivia, FREED service user

[Read Olivia's full story](#)



Self-help resources

We hope that this guide has given you the confidence to reach out for help and support. However, if you don't quite feel ready yet, there are self-help resources you can use yourself. These may also help you to start making changes if you are waiting for treatment, or provide additional support alongside treatment.

There are lots of books, websites and resources available on eating disorders. The following have all been based on research and are supported by clinicians. Most of them are based on cognitive-behavioural therapy for eating disorders.

Cognitive-behavioural therapy self-help books for eating disorders:

- Beating Your Eating Disorder: A Cognitive-Behavioral Self-Help Guide for Adult Sufferers and their Carers (Glenn Waller, Victoria Mountford, Rachel Lawson, Emma Gray, Helen Cordery, Hendrik Hinrichsen, 2010).
- Getting Better Bite by Bite: A Survival Kit for Sufferers of Bulimia Nervosa and Binge Eating Disorders (Ulrike Schmidt, Janet Treasure and June Alexander, 2015)
- Overcoming Binge Eating, Second Edition: The Proven Program to Learn Why You Binge and How You Can Stop (Christopher Fairburn, 2013)



Websites and online resources:

www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk

Beat is the UK eating disorder charity. Their website has lots of helpful information on eating disorders and treatment. They also offer online and telephone support, and have a helpfinder service to see what treatment options are available near you.

[Click here to visit](#)

www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/Home/Resources/Looking-After-Yourself

The Centre for Clinical Interventions (CCI) is a part of the Department of Health in Western Australia. They provide online resources for a range of psychological difficulties.

Their 'Overcoming Disordered Eating' series includes 18 downloadable workbooks based on cognitive-behavioural therapy for eating disorders. They also offer brief information sheets on a range of topics to do with eating disorders.

[Click here to visit](#)

www.freedfromed.co.uk

The website for FREED, First Episode Rapid Early Intervention for Eating Disorders. We have information on eating disorders, the importance of early intervention, and how to seek help. There are resources you can download and stories from young people who have recovered from an eating disorder.

[Click here to visit](#)

Helpful apps:

- Recovery Record
- Rise Up

Both these apps are free for Android and iOS and complement eating disorder therapy by providing a way to monitor eating, feelings, thoughts, goals and progress.