Feeling out of control from binge eating

Hi Alice,

I suffer from overeating constantly and binge eating. I've gained a considerable amount of weight and have tried to get my eating under control as a result, but when I try to stick to a diet, all I think about is food. I can't stop thinking about food until I eat something; when I try to ignore it, the urge doesn't go away. It's hard to think about anything else, so I usually give in. I feel out of control, like food controls my life, and like I'll never get my weight down to a weight I'm comfortable with. I don't have health insurance, so I can't get psychotherapy. How can I get my eating under control? Do you know of any free accessible resources I can use like books or websites that would be helpful?

Answer

Dear Reader,

You may find it helpful to know you're not alone, as the situation you describe is all too common. Disordered eating, including binge eating disorder, is an issue that affects approximately 30 million people at some point during their lives. Binge eating disorder is a pattern of someone eating a large amount of food in a short amount of time. This behavior is often combined with feeling like they don't have control of themselves when they eat or feeling a lot of shame or guilt after binging. Binge eating disorder differs from other forms of disordered eating in that there's no purging (such as vomiting or diuretic use) involved. That being said, it's a serious condition that can be associated with obesity and obesity-associated diseases. Some common symptoms may include feeling uncomfortable eating around others for fear of judgment, low self-esteem around body image, or having emotional discomfort after eating. It's also worth noting that not everyone who binge eats has a binge eating disorder. When it comes to binge eating, it may feel like food has control over your life. Seeking out resources for help and support is a great first step to taking some control back, and there are additional steps you can take to make the transition easier.

You mentioned that you've tried dieting. While dieting may work for some people, they're often very restrictive and tend to lead to more guilt and shame if they aren't consistently followed. It might be useful to re-examine your relationship with food:
• You may consider bringing mindfulness into your experience. If you're able, you may try to pause the next time you feel the urge to binge and try to connect with your feelings. For example, eating can be a way to cope with stressful feelings. If feelings of stress are associated with the urge, you may also look into adding some additional coping tools for your toolbox such as meditation, yoga, or reaching out for support. Another idea is to keep a journal that tracks what you’re feeling when you want to binge and what you want to eat when you do so — you might be able to pinpoint triggers that contribute to binge eating. Any of these strategies can be ones you engage with regularly to help cope with stress.
• You may also observe the patterns you’re experiencing when you feel the urge, you may take note of your mood and your pattern of eating at that time. Being able to observe patterns over time may also help you better understand your behavior.
• Though the urge may feel quite strong, you may be able to build a tolerance for it over time by pausing, with the recognition that an urge will likely feel strong at first, reach a point, and then subside with time. Allowing this to occur, without judgement, is what is referred to as “urge surfing”. You may ride out this wave of feeling by distraction or even reaching out to a friend or loved one for support.
• You might also consider the foods you keep at home. Keeping stocked on nutritious foods is key. On the other hand, you may find that you tend to keep fewer quantities (or none) of the foods readily available that you tend to gravitate towards when you get the urge to binge. This may help you to eat them in moderation without eliminating any foods from your diet. Simultaneously, it may assist with not binging them in large quantities.

Other strategies could include incorporating habits such as regular physical activity, routine bedtimes, or journaling about your feelings. If you notice an overwhelming urge to binge eat when you’re stressed, then stress management techniques, such as meditation or yoga, may be helpful as well. Finally, your friends and family can be a wonderful source of support for you if you feel like you’re losing control. If you feel comfortable, maybe you can reach out to someone when you feel the need to binge coming on.

Reader, you asked about free accessible resources. The National Eating Disorder Association (NEDA) [2] has a wealth of resources for people who struggle with eating disorders. Beyond the information on their website, NEDA runs an Information and Referral Helpline [3] through which you can connect with staff members who can help you find treatment programs, support groups, and other information specific to your situation. These resources are free and can help connect you with others who may currently be going through or have already gone through situations similar to your own. Other affordable options for treatment are training institutes accredited by the American Psychoanalytic Association [4]. These institutes allow people to receive psychotherapy from therapists in training at a lower price tag or on a sliding scale basis. While these options aren’t free, they’re more accessible and a great way to speak to a mental health professional on an individual basis if you have more personal concerns. You may find the Finding low-cost counseling [5] Q&A to be a useful resource as well.

Feeling a loss of control when it comes to food can be a scary and intimidating process; however, you’re not alone. If you’re interested, check out the Disordered Eating & Eating Disorders [6] category in the Go Ask Alice! Nutrition & Physical Activity [7] archives for more information and resources. Reaching out is a great first step, and hopefully some of these resources and tips will
help you improve your relationship with food moving forward.

Alice!

Category:
Nutrition & Physical Activity [7]
Disordered Eating & Eating Disorders [6]

Related questions

I want to recover from my eating disorder and need to learn how [8]
I want to lose weight, but I’m scared I’ll lose control [9]
How to find a therapist [10]

Resources

Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [11]
Mental Health Services (CUIMC) [12]

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[4] https://apsa.org/content/low-fee-clinics?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIq5uH1fCM7AIvWv7jBx1IygWnEAAYASAAEgJAVfD_BwE
[12] https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/mental-health-services-cuimc