

7 hidden food hang-ups

You may not have bulimia or anorexia, but many of us are affected by ingrained eating patterns that make our lives a misery

WORDS Melissa Temple

Do you cut out food groups, weigh yourself every day, exercise obsessively to make up for those evening chocolate bars, or regularly reward yourself with something yummy? If so, you probably consider yourself perfectly normal. It may come as a shock to learn all these habits could be considered disordered eating patterns. There's no formal definition of disordered eating, but if your attitude to food takes pleasure out of your life, and if you recognise any of our seven hang-ups (right), you may be affected. In a recent survey, one in three adults said that they were permanently on a diet, while more than one in 20 women said they worried about their weight for more than three hours every day – so even if you don't fall into the disordered eating category, chances are you have friends, relatives or colleagues who do. 'Many subtle "diet" behaviours can be viewed as

disordered eating – all the psychological implications of denying yourself, then beating yourself up when your resolve crumbles, can be extremely damaging,' says Alison Bird, a clinical hypnotherapist who specialises in eating disorders.

If food plays a major role in your life and you feel controlled by it, it doesn't necessarily mean you have an eating disorder. Disordered eating is distinct from illnesses such as anorexia or bulimia. While these have distinct symptoms – restricting food in anorexia, or bingeing and purging in bulimia – disordered eating is less extreme and signs are more vague. But it can still have negative consequences.

Sarah is 35, works full-time and is a member of a gym. She works out for an hour before work twice a week, and runs five to 10 miles every weekend. While you might envy Sarah's self-discipline and admire her toned body, her mind is in turmoil. She's not anorexic or bulimic but her attitude to eating and her body looms large in her life. 'If I'm going out for a meal with my husband, I'll run a bit harder or get to the gym a bit earlier the week before so I can have a pudding,' says Sarah. And she admits to being upset if she can't keep up her exercise regime. 'Once I twisted my ankle at work and, apart from the pain, I was completely gutted that I wouldn't be able to go to the gym for a week.' Sarah's story probably sounds familiar – thousands of women around the UK have similar patterns.

The root of the problem

There are many reasons why women may develop disordered eating habits, but lack of self-worth is often at the root. 'Body image can be tied up with self-esteem,' says Bird. 'So many women see losing weight as a way to feel better about themselves.' It's hardly surprising. From slimming magazines, to ads, to the fashion industry, we live in a society that fixates on thinness. At the same time, obesity is on the rise so the gap between average body weight and 'ideal' body weight is getting wider – which experts say creates heightened anxiety about body image. With skinny celebs everywhere we look, it's easy to see why we might think that shedding pounds will make us more attractive, successful »

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Spot the signs

Do any of these describe your attitude to food?

1 Yo-yo or fad dieting
'You're either being good or bad when you're on a diet,' says Bird, 'so when a diet fails, you blame yourself. But it's human nature to fight back when someone puts a restriction on you, so it's no wonder that 97 per cent of diets fail.' The worrying result is that it's not only your weight that yo-yos, but also your self-esteem.

2 Categorising food
By labelling foods 'naughty' or 'healthy' you are creating an association with good or bad. So if you eat a 'naughty' food, you'll feel you're doing something wrong, which is likely to make you feel guilty. This could then drive you to do something to compensate, like skipping a meal or overexercising.

3 Compensating
'It's not uncommon to use the occasional laxative as a way of being able to eat something you shouldn't, or as a way of getting rid of something afterwards,' says Bird. 'However, apart from the fact that once you've eaten the food it's really too late, the risk is that if you try this once, you might do so again, and it can become a regular habit, potentially leading to a purging and bingeing cycle.' Overexercising and vomiting are other forms of compensating.

4 Cutting out food groups
Banishing carbs is a popular way to lose weight, but your body needs them to make energy. As long as you don't have allergies or intolerances, cutting out food groups purely for weight loss means your body will miss out on essential nutrients. 'Nature has given us taste buds for a reason,' says Bird. 'We're designed to enjoy different foods so we get a balanced diet.'

5 Obsessive weighing
'There's a danger with weighing yourself regularly that your self-esteem becomes tied up with your weight, and the scales have power over you,' says Bird. 'A healthier way to lose weight is to go by how you feel, how tight your clothes are and how much energy you have.'

6 Skipping breakfast
The idea of breakfast scares a lot of people because it kickstarts their metabolism and by mid-morning they're hungry again. So they'd rather skip breakfast and eat less food. The trouble is, this can lead to overeating later in the day.

7 Eating when you're unhappy
'For many people eating is a habit,' says Bird. 'For example, if you've always eaten when you're bored or stressed, your brain would have made neural connections between those feelings and food.' Talking therapies and hypnotherapy can help you to 'reprogramme' your brain to change those connections permanently, while also addressing any underlying emotional issues.



and happy. And losing weight often leads to compliments from other people, so many of us see weight loss as an accomplishment. 'People with disordered eating tend to get their goals muddled,' says Bird. 'As a society we worship at the altar of weight loss, but an obsession with weight can easily lead to dangerous behaviours and habits.'

But it's not just about media images. Food is a very emotive psychological issue, and one of the reasons for this is the way many of us have been brought up to view it. In childhood, it's likely your parents used food to comfort, punish or reward. The result? We all have deeply ingrained beliefs and habits about it. If you were ever told, 'Eat up your main course and you can have pudding', this is likely to have instilled in you the idea that sweet foods are a reward. Likewise, 'You can't leave the table until your plate's clean' taught you that wasting food is not acceptable. According to Bird, 'There are many beliefs we have never challenged and we may not even know where they came from. But they can have a profound effect on how we treat food – as a prop when we're feeling low, or as something to be withheld as a punishment.'

Extreme stress can also be a trigger for disordered eating. 'Very often people lose weight while going through a traumatic event,' says Bird. 'And not eating can become a coping mechanism – a way of controlling something when everything else around you seems to be falling apart.'

Why it's a problem

So does it really matter if you're skipping meals to make up for tucking in the day before? If it's a one-off, probably not. But if you keep approaching eating like this, it could affect your health. Firstly, restricting your calorie intake may not help you lose weight. A lower intake results in your body's metabolism slowing down in a bid to protect itself from starvation. If you keep skipping meals or compensating for a biscuit binge by overexercising, eventually you may start to gain weight because your body adapts to burning fewer calories. Eating like this can also dramatically affect your mood. Most people start to feel lethargic and miserable when hungry, and serotonin levels in the brain change, causing food cravings. When you reach for the biscuits, feelings of failure creep in, and this makes you feel even worse. You can end up in a cycle of anxiety and self-loathing.



For so many women, there's a minefield of agonising feelings connected with food and eating that are either ignored or just accepted. And if we never address them, we could be passing them on to our children without realising it. With recent government figures showing childhood eating disorders on the rise, there couldn't be a greater need to tackle eating problems. Raising self-esteem and enjoying life are surely more worthwhile goals than losing weight or getting a toned bottom. By learning to eat and exercise for health, hopefully we can learn to love and respect our bodies whatever our shape and size. **h**

● *Alison Bird is a clinical hypnotherapist who specialises in weight control and eating disorders. She's affiliated to the National Centre for Eating Disorders. Contact her on 01206 548175 or visit www.alisonbird.co.uk.*

5 mantras for healthy eating

- 1 ONE STEP AT A TIME** Make changes slowly and look to the long-term goal of a healthy body for life.
- 2 DITCH THE RULES** Don't restrict yourself too much or you'll just want to rebel.
- 3 YOU DON'T HAVE TO EAT EVERYTHING** If you have any leftover food, why not freeze it for another day rather than stuffing yourself silly just because it's there?
- 4 EAT MINDFULLY** Take time to enjoy the aroma, taste and texture. After all, food is one of life's pleasures.
- 5 KNOW WHEN YOU'VE HAD ENOUGH** Rather than eating until you're full, stop and imagine how you'd feel if someone took your plate away. Can you say, 'That was lovely, but I've had enough'? If so, stop eating.

Eat with your mind

'Habitual thoughts lead to over- or undereating,' says Alison Bird. 'Everything you do starts with a thought, so if you can change your thoughts, you can change your habits. Statements like, "I can't just have one!" or "I'll make up for it later" or "I've blown it now so I might as well have the lot!" are typical examples. Be aware of how your self-talk affects your mood and eating habits. Gradually start to change it by telling yourself, for example, "I am an adult. I can enjoy and be satisfied with just one biscuit." Hypnotherapy is particularly useful in helping to change thoughts and beliefs.'