

Eating disorders and anxiety

Many people who experience an eating disorder will also experience another mental illness. The most frequently co-occurring mental illnesses for people with eating disorders are anxiety and mood disorders. Up to two-thirds of people with eating disorders will also experience an anxiety disorder in their lives.

What is anxiety?

Anxious feelings can range from nervousness to intense panic. When we are in stressful situations we all experience these feelings to some degree, but they often subside once the stressful situation has passed. For people with clinical anxiety these feelings do not subside, and are often so intense that it can make it difficult to cope with daily life. Anxiety disorders are the most common mental illness in Australia, affecting 1 in 7 people each year, and 1 in 4 people at some stage in their life.

Types of anxiety disorders

Generalised anxiety disorder – feeling anxious or worried about everyday life, to the point where these feelings interfere with a person's ability to carry out normal activities.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) – having recurring, unpleasant and intrusive thoughts that lead people to compulsively carry out a behaviour or set of

behaviours, in order to alleviate the anxiety associated with these thoughts.

Panic Disorder – when panic attacks are recurrent and disabling.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) – intense fear or panic linked to a traumatic event.

Social anxiety – an intense fear of embarrassment or criticism in social situations, such as interactions with others or performing in front of others.

Specific phobias – having feelings of terror or panic that are disproportionate to the actual threat of the situation, object, animal or activity.

What are the links between eating disorders and anxiety?

Several studies have shown that anxiety often precedes the onset of an eating disorder. For some people, an eating disorder becomes a coping mechanism to deal with the pain and distress brought on by anxiety. People living with severe anxiety may attempt to regain a sense of control by strictly regulating their food intake, exercise, and weight. For people who develop an eating disorder before they develop anxiety, these severe anxious feelings may arise from difficulties associated with the symptoms of eating disorders, such as changes

in weight and attempting to stick to stringent self-imposed 'rules' about exercise and food. For someone experiencing both these conditions, it can be difficult for them to identify which one began first.

There are some overlaps in symptoms of anxiety and eating disorders. Anxiety about eating, weight gain, and social evaluation are all common symptoms of eating disorders that could also contribute to a diagnosis of anxiety. Some people develop obsessive-compulsive behaviours relating to food preparation, how they eat, exercise, and weighing or measuring themselves. The underlying reasons why an individual develops an eating disorder or an anxiety disorder may be the same.

Treatment

Weight restoration tends to improve anxiety symptoms; however, recovery from one disorder does not necessarily guarantee recovery from the other. Given that both eating disorders and anxiety disorders often have underlying causes and symptoms, it is important that both disorders are properly addressed. Addressing and attempting to heal from the issues that caused these disorders is important.

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Different treatment options work for different people. For example, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) has been proven to be very effective for the treatment of both anxiety and eating disorders in many people. This focuses on understanding and changing how people think and behave. Other forms of psychotherapy, support groups, and medications can also be effective. The underlying theme of many of these treatments is finding healthier ways of coping with the difficulties brought on by both anxiety and eating disorders.

How can EDV help?

If you or someone you know is experiencing anxiety and an eating disorder, remember that you are not alone. EDV can provide support and understands how overwhelming it can feel to reach out for support. If you contact the EDV Helpline (1300 550 236 or help@eatingdisorders.org.au) we can talk with you about how you're feeling and help link you in with services, including giving details of health professionals with experience working with anxiety and eating disorders. EDV also has a team of psychologists experienced in treating eating disorders and anxiety. Education, support and information on how to begin the recovery journey is accessible and evidence-based, so that people experiencing anxiety and an eating disorder can develop a greater understanding of how these two mental health illnesses often exist alongside each other.

Resources for people with eating disorders and anxiety

Those who are experiencing an eating disorder and anxiety are encouraged to contact the EDV Helpline on 1300 550 236 or Anxiety Recovery Centre Victoria (ARCVIC) on 1300 269 438. Further information about anxiety can be found on the ARCVIC website: <http://www.arcvic.org.au>. Outside of business hours, contact Suicide Line on 1300 651 251 or Lifeline on 13 11 14 for immediate crisis support.

Tips for coping with anxiety and an eating disorder

- Try breathing techniques, i.e. Breathing Waltz: Breathe in for the count of 3, hold your breath for the count of 3, breathe out for the count of 3. Repeat for one minute.
- Try sensory focus techniques, i.e. focus on each of the five senses for 10 seconds. What are you touching, what do you smell, what do you hear, what do you see and what do you taste?
- Have a trusted support person you can call and speak about your feelings of anxiety when they arise.
- Keep a 'Happy List' nearby, listing activities, people or memories that bring a smile to your face and keep you calm. This might be as simple as a warm cup of tea, laughing with a friend, playing with your pet or remembering a favourite holiday.



References

Hughes, E.K., Goldschmidt, A. B., Labuschagne, Z., Loeb, K. L., Sawyer, S. M., Le Grange, D. (2013) Eating Disorders with and without Comorbid Depression and Anxiety: Similarities and differences in a clinical sample of children and adolescents. *Eating Disorders Review*, 21, 386–394.

<http://www.eatingdisorderhope.com/treatment-for-eating-disorders/co-occurring-dual-diagnosis/anxiety>

<http://www.adaa.org/understanding-anxiety/related-illnesses/eating-disorders>

<http://www.beyondblue.org.au/>