



## Eating Disorders and Substance Use

This factsheet contains information on eating disorders and substance use. It is common for people with eating disorders to engage in problematic substance use, and vice versa, so it is useful to understand their relationship and appropriate treatment and support options.

### What is substance use?

Substance use is a broad term that refers to the use of **alcohol, drugs (prescription and illicit) and other addictive substances (such as tobacco and caffeine)**. Some substances that are commonly used by people with eating disorders are alcohol, tobacco, caffeine, stimulants, prescription medications, laxatives, diuretics and the illicit drugs- amphetamines, heroin and cocaine.

Substance misuse is when the use of substances becomes excessive, unmanageable, is distressing, and is impacting significantly on a person's ability to engage in life. Some substances are highly addictive and when used often, people can become physically and psychologically dependent on them.

It is important to recognise when substance use has become a problem - there are some common signs to look out for listed below:

- Physical symptoms – becoming more tolerant to the substance and requiring more the experience the same effects, withdrawal when not using the substance.

- Inability to control use of the substance – being unable to reduce or stop using the substance.
- Using the substance alone or in secret.
- Neglecting responsibilities and becoming disengaged from activities previously enjoyed (for example work, family, sport, social events).

### How is substance misuse related to eating disorders?

Research tells us that about 50% of people with an eating disorder also engage in substance misuse, (compared with 9% of the general population). People who experience binge eating and purging behaviours report higher rates of substance misuse.

Substance misuse can have negative impacts on a person's health and when combined with an eating disorder this increases the risk of medical complications and even mortality. We also know that people with an eating disorder that engage in substance misuse can have a higher rate of relapse and overall longer recovery period.

People with eating disorders may use substances to help cope with and mask negative emotions. Often these same negatives emotions (or the ability to regulate emotions) can be a root cause of the eating disorder.

It is also very common for people to use substances alongside restrictive behaviours of eating disorders. You can see then how an eating disorder and substance use can easily become intertwined and dependent on the other. This creates a vicious cycle for the person and means that it is very important the person seek professional support to assess and treat the eating disorder and substance use together.

*"I can now so clearly see how my alcoholism and eating disorder were entwined, and how I wasn't able to go into recovery for one until I went into recovery for both. For me, my recovery has been centered on learning to cope without resorting to self-destruction. When I only focused on cutting down my drinking, or only focused on reeling in my eating disorder, I often just ramped up the negative behaviour associated with the condition I wasn't focusing on." (Kirst, 2019)*

### Risk factors

Researchers have made great efforts to understand the reasons behind why people with eating disorders are more likely to engage in substance misuse and have found some past experiences, personality traits and thinking patterns make certain people at greater risk. These include:

- Problems with regulating moods and emotions.
- Low self-esteem.
- Past experience of abuse or trauma.

- Co-occurring anxiety and/or depression.
- A tendency to partake in impulsive behaviours.

There also some evidence to suggest that genetics may play a role in eating disorders and substance use.

## Support and treatment

If you (or someone you know) is experiencing symptoms of an eating disorder and/or substance abuse, remember that you are not alone and there are many treatment and support options available.

It is extremely common to feel unsure, anxious, ashamed, intimidated and unworthy about seeking support for an eating disorder and difficulties with substance use. You can be assured that all options are judgement free and the earlier you seek professional support, the greater the chance of a full recovery. It is important to know that eating disorders and substance use disorders are treatable and full recovery is possible with adequate care and professional support.

Because many of the issues underlying eating disorders and substance use are similar, it is important to treat both conditions **at the same time**. We know that if just one condition is treated it can cause the other to deteriorate meaning a longer and more difficult recovery process and higher chance of relapse.

When seeking treatment for an eating disorder it is important to be open and honest and discuss with your GP or other health professional if you think you may have difficulties managing your alcohol or other drug use.

The actual treatment will vary depending on the needs of the person, but will generally involve a 'team' of health professionals who will provide medical, nutritional and psychological support – including your GP, psychologist, psychiatrist and dietician.

You may expect any of the following interventions during treatment from a trained health professional:

- Support for your physical health, including any medical complications associated with eating disorder behaviours and substance use.
- Psychoeducation to provide information on eating disorders, substance use, and how these can impact on a person's health and wellbeing.
- Support from a mental health practitioner/clinician to help you to explore the underlying reasons that contribute to the eating disorder and substance use, minimise the harm associated with substance use and help you to build skills and develop strategies to be able to manage without the eating disorder and substance use.
- Relapse prevention training.
- Replacing destructive thinking surrounding food with a more balanced perspective on eating.
- Developing healthy coping skills for managing cravings and destructive emotions.
- Abstinence from the substance causing issues.
- Dietary education and planning.

*Note that some eating disorder treatment services may require you to complete a supported detox/ methadone program before accessing treatment. This will be assessed on a case-by-case basis and health providers will advise and link you with services that can help.*

Below you can find contact details for a range of eating disorder and alcohol and drug support organisations who will be able to assist you with any specific questions.

## Support services

Both Eating Disorders Victoria and the Butterfly Foundation have online support groups available to assist those experiencing eating disorders.

To contact Eating Disorders Victoria, call 1300 550 236 or email [hub@eatingdisorders.org.au](mailto:hub@eatingdisorders.org.au) or visit our website at [www.eatingdisorders.org.au](http://www.eatingdisorders.org.au)

Below are some self-access support groups and services available for those with substance use issues:

Directline – 1800 888 236 - is a free and confidential 24/7 telephone service for people affected by addiction. They also offer information about local support groups and meetings.

Counselling Online – 24/7 free and confidential online chat support service for people affected by drug or alcohol use.  
[www.counsellingonline.org.au](http://www.counsellingonline.org.au)

Turning Point – website outlines a range of alcohol and drug use treatment and support services. [www.turningpoint.org.au](http://www.turningpoint.org.au)

Alcoholics Anonymous – community based recovery program for people who have experienced addiction to alcohol.  
[www.aa.org.au](http://www.aa.org.au)

Narcotics Anonymous Victoria - community based recovery program for people who have experienced addiction to narcotics.  
[www.navic.net.au](http://www.navic.net.au)

For full references for this article please see our website.