

Information Handout

Professional Version | US English

What Is Anorexia?



Description

It is common to feel conscious of your eating, but extreme dieting and weight loss can lead to an eating disorder called anorexia (or anorexia nervosa), which impacts your physical and mental health. It is thought between 1 and 4 out of every 100 people will experience anorexia nervosa at some point during their lives. The good news is that there are effective psychological and medical treatments for anorexia nervosa, including cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT).

The *What Is Anorexia?* information handout is designed to help clients with anorexia nervosa understand more about their condition. It includes:

- A summary of the most common symptoms of anorexia.
- Descriptions of what it can feel like to have anorexia.
- A description of why anorexia might not get better by itself, derived from the Fairburn, Cooper & Shafran (2003) transdiagnostic cognitive model of eating disorders.
- A brief overview of evidence-based psychological treatments for anorexia.

Instructions

Our 'What Is ...?' series is designed to support your clients:

- **Reassure and encourage optimism.** Many clients find it hugely reassuring to know there is a name for what they are experiencing, and that there are evidence-based psychological models and treatments specifically designed to help.
- **Scaffold knowledge.** The handouts are perfect during early stages of therapy to help your clients understand how their symptoms fit together and make sense.
- **Signposting.** If you're just seeing a client briefly for assessment, or you have a curious client who wants to know more, these resources can be a helpful part of guiding them to the right service.

References

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What Is Anorexia?

You try to prevent weight gain by eating less, having strict rules about eating, vomiting or using laxatives.

You keep thinking about your weight and body shape.

You sometimes feel low and irritable, or you don't want to be around others.

You sometimes lose control of your food intake (eg., binge eating).

It is common to feel conscious of your eating, but extreme dieting and weight loss can lead to an eating disorder called anorexia (or anorexia nervosa), which impacts your physical and mental health.

It is thought between 1 and 4 out of every 100 people will experience anorexia nervosa at some point during their lives. The good news is that there are effective psychological and medical treatments for anorexia nervosa, including cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT).

The core of anorexia: extreme beliefs about your shape, weight, and eating

People with anorexia want to have total control over their food intake, which leads to restricted eating and weight loss. Controlling your food intake can feel good at first, but over time it can become more and more extreme. People with anorexia also worry that relaxing their control will have terrible consequences.

I might have lost weight, but I feel like I need to lose more.



If I stop controlling my eating, I'll get fat.



I must keep my weight below a certain number.



Anorexia can get stuck or escalate for a few reasons:

The effects of starvation

Limiting your food intake leads to symptoms of starvation (or 'Starvation Syndrome'), which has a big impact on your thoughts, feelings, behavior, and body. It can make you more focused on your eating and less interested in other areas of your life. Other side-effects of starvation include feeling uncomfortable after eating and worrying that you will lose control over what you eat. This makes eating feel very threatening and leads to more restriction.

Using extreme strategies to control your weight and body shape

Extreme strategies for controlling your weight might include restricting your eating, setting strict food-focused 'rules', or exercising a lot. Unfortunately, these strategies make the effects of starvation worse. You might also worry that relaxing these strategies will have terrible consequences (e.g., suddenly gaining weight), or leave you feeling guilty when you don't use them. This can make your control strategies more fixed and extreme over time.

Your beliefs about the importance of controlling your weight

Holding extreme beliefs about controlling your weight and eating also fuels anorexia. For example, you might believe that thinness is linked to success, safety, or being acceptable to others. Unfortunately, these beliefs keep you focused on your weight and get in the way of the other areas of life that you care about. Judging yourself on your ability to control your weight and shape can also lead to anxiety, guilt, self-criticism, and low self-esteem.

Treatment for anorexia

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is an effective treatment for anorexia. CBT can help you overcome your food- and weight-related fears, address the issues that have contributed to your eating difficulties (e.g., difficult feelings about yourself, your body, or your relationships), and build a happier life for yourself.

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Resource details

Title: What Is Anorexia?

Type: Information Handout

Language: English (US)

Translated title: What Is Anorexia?

URL: <https://www.psychologytools.com/resource/what-is-anorexia>

Resource format: Professional

Version: 20230721

Last updated by: JP

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