

# Information Handout

Professional Version | US English

# What Keeps Bulimia Going?



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## Description

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Many people go through periods where they eat more or less than usual. If these episodes are extreme, distressing, or happen often, they may be a sign of bulimia nervosa. Bulimia can cause a wide spectrum of experiences which include:

- Binge eating: episodes when your eating feels out of control, excessive, and difficult to stop.
- Using compensatory behaviors to avoid gaining weight, such as vomiting, restricting what you eat, doing heavy exercise, or taking laxatives or diet pills.
- Worrying about your weight or how you look.
- Spending a lot of time and energy in activities related to your weight or eating: such as calorie counting, checking your weight often, using mirrors excessively or avoiding them altogether.
- Being concerned about your shape, weight, or eating to the extent that it stops you from doing things or gets in the way of your life.

Research studies have shown that cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a helpful psychological therapy for bulimia. CBT therapists work a bit like firefighters: while the fire is burning they're not so interested in what caused it, but are more focused on what is keeping it going, and what they can do to put it out. This is because if they can work out what keeps a problem going, they can treat the problem by 'removing the fuel' and interrupting this maintaining cycle.

Studies suggest that bulimia is often maintained by several different factors. The *What Keeps Bulimia Going?* information handout describes some of the key parts which maintain bulimia. It illustrates them in a vicious flower format in which each 'petal' represents a separate maintenance cycle. Helping clients to understand more about these processes is an essential part of cognitive therapy for bulimia. Therapists can use this handout as a focus for discussion, or as a template from which to formulate an idiosyncratic model of a client's experiences.

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## Instructions

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### Suggested Question



*One interesting way of thinking about bulimia is to look at why, for some people, it does not get better by itself. This handout shows some of the most common reasons why some people keep experiencing symptoms of bulimia. I wonder if we could look at it together and think about whether it describes some of what is happening for you?*

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## References

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# What Keeps Bulimia Going?

If you try very hard to diet or control your weight, this may lead to undereating. Your body may not get the energy that it needs.

The less you eat, the more you feel hunger, cravings, and other biological pressures to eat. This 'hunger pressure' builds up over time and can eventually lead to binges. After a binge, you might want to eat even less, but this increases the risk of losing control and bingeing again.

Binge-eating can lead to fears about changes in your weight, so you might use weight-control behaviors like vomiting, laxatives, or extreme exercise to compensate or prevent weight gain. Over time, purging and other compensatory behaviors might become a way of justifying binge-eating to yourself. They can lead to weight gain because they leave you feeling hungry, craving food, and at risk of more binges.

**Adopting all-or-nothing patterns of eating**

**Purging and other weight-control behaviors**

What keeps it going?

**Bulimia**

**Holding extreme beliefs about your shape, weight, and eating**

**Using food to manage how you feel**

When you are very concerned about your shape and weight, you are likely to develop strict rules for eating.

Extreme beliefs about your shape, weight, and eating keep you focused on these issues. Rules that are difficult to live up to can lead to disappointment and low self-worth. When you break a food-related rule, you might find yourself 'giving up' and lapsing into uncontrolled eating, which seems to confirm your lack of control, and the importance of sticking to your extreme rules.

If you have bulimia, you may respond to difficult situations and emotions by binge-eating and purging. This might be because you are sensitive to intense feelings or don't have other ways of coping. In the short-term, bulimia seems to help manage your emotions and feel less distressed.

Coping in this way doesn't address your underlying problems or what causes these feelings, and it might stop you from developing other, more helpful ways of coping. This can make you feel even worse, which could trigger more binge-eating.

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