

## **Bulimia Nervosa**

In my last column, I wrote about Anorexia Nervosa. This column is about another eating disorder, Bulimia Nervosa.

Now we have all partaken of, perhaps even enjoyed, the occasional bout of overeating. And many of us regularly go on diets to lose weight, change our shape or improve our eating patterns. These are considered fairly normal behaviours in Western society. Bulimia nervosa is not considered normal eating behaviour.

Bulimia nervosa involves consuming what are perceived as large quantities of food within a short period of time and with seeming lack of control. These binges occur on a regular basis (at least twice weekly) and over an extended period of time. This is considered a pattern of disordered eating, particularly when associated with self-induced vomiting and/or use of laxatives. In this way, people with bulimia nervosa control their weight. They become proficient at 'managing' their bingeing and purging although bulimia is a major focus in their lives.

People struggling with bulimia are seriously afraid of gaining weight and exhibit persistent dissatisfaction with body shape and appearance. Their perception of their size and body shape is distorted.

Bulimia usually starts in the teenage years with normal attempts at dieting, however the person soon loses control of the process and begins bingeing, vomiting and purging. Body weight varies with each individual. Many people will actually eat quite normal quantities of food however they perceive that they have eaten excessive amounts and therefore need to get rid of it.

Most people with bulimia feel absolute shame and disgust about their lack of control over eating and the way they purge food from their bodies. They become secretive about their actions and may feel cut off from their emotions. Food can become their 'escape' – offering comfort and release from emotional issues and stressful situations.

Serious health problems are associated with bulimia. Excessive vomiting and the use of laxatives and diuretics also can cause stomach, bowel, and gastrointestinal tract disturbances as well as oesophagus tears and inflamed gums. Dehydration and electrolyte imbalances brought on by purging can cause heart, kidney, bladder and bowel problems. If people can find ways to stop purging, they reduce their medical complications fourfold. Frequently too, people with bulimia lack energy. All of their physical and emotional energy is consumed with their disordered eating.

It is also known that people with bulimia have a higher risk of developing depression, anxiety or alcohol and drug problems. Living through bulimia can be overwhelming, frightening and isolating. It is incredibly difficult for a person with bulimia to seek professional help.

The assessment and treatment of bulimia usually starts with a discussion with a GP or Counsellor. Treatment is available and outcomes tend to be very positive.

Like Minds Taranaki facilitates a range of support groups. Recently we have been asked by a number of people struggling with disordered eating to establish a support group to provide understanding and non-judgemental support. This we will do if interest in such a group is evident.

Gordon Hudson is manager of Like Minds Taranaki, an organisation dedicated to promoting mental health, demystifying mental illness and overcoming prejudices and discrimination. Call (06)759-0966.