

Binge Eating Disorder

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What is BED?

Binge Eating Disorder (BED) is a serious and clinically recognised **mental health disorder**. It is characterised by the consumption of a **large amount of food**, in a relatively **short time period** (usually rapidly), while experiencing a sense of **loss of control** over what or how much one is eating^{1,2}.

BED is one of the **most common types** of eating disorders, affecting approximately **1 in 50 people in the UK**, making it **more common** than **Anorexia Nervosa** and **Bulimia Nervosa** combined³.

Around **1.25 million people** in the UK have an **eating disorder**²

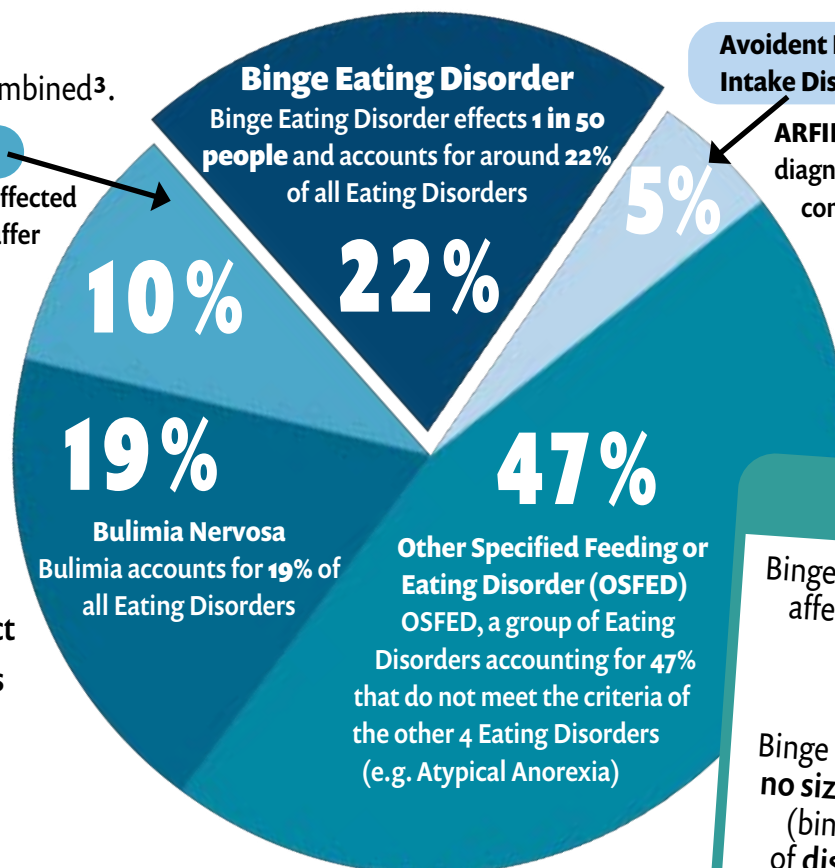


Anorexia Nervosa

Around **10%** of people affected by an eating disorder suffer from Anorexia nervosa



BED has been shown to predominantly affect **women (60%)** and has recently shown to be the **most prevalent in teenagers**^{1,4,5}.



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Binge Eating Disorder effects **1 in 50 people** and accounts for around **22%** of all Eating Disorders

Avoidant Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID)

ARFID, the most recently diagnosed eating disorder contributes to **5%** of recognised Eating Disorders

Myth 1

Binge eating disorder **only** affects **higher-weight** people.

Fact:

Binge eating disorder has **no size**; the **behaviours** (bingeing) and level of **distress** inform the diagnosis.



What are the main causes of BED?

There is an **increased risk** of developing **BED** in people who have **experienced body dissatisfaction** or previously engaged in **excessive dieting**⁶.

The over **concern** about **weight** and **body shape** can result in **restrictive eating patterns**, leading to **binge behaviours**.

Up to **50%** of people who **restrict eating** to lose weight end up **bingeing**⁷.

Other factors linked to an **increased risk** of **BED** can include experiencing significant **poverty**, **violence**, **traumatic events**, **food insecurity**, **social pressure** or a **major mental illness**^{8,9}.

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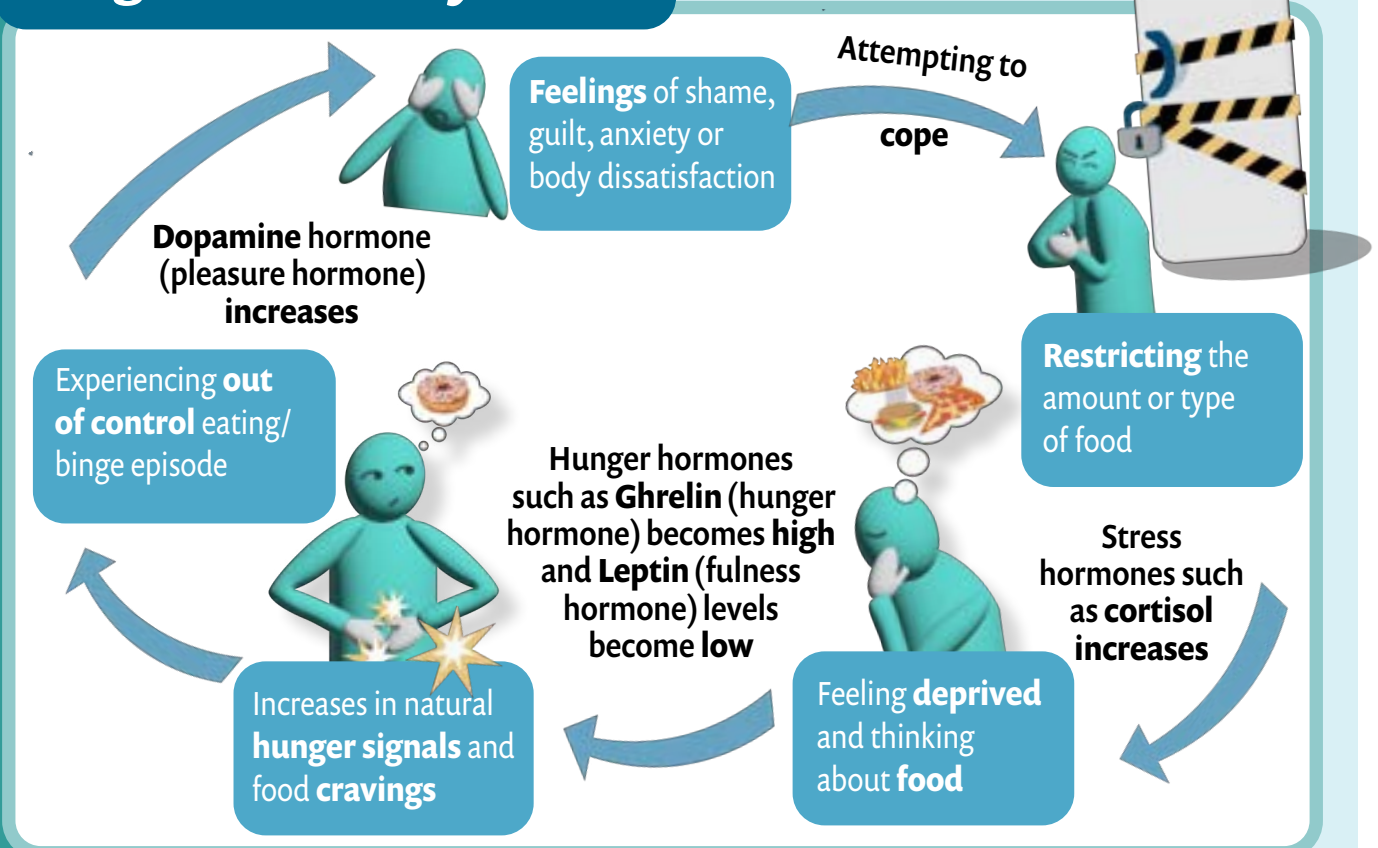
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What are the main signs of BED?

An **objective binge episode** involves a **loss of control** over eating and consuming a very large amount of food (**2-3 times** a typical meal or snack, around **3000-4500 kcal**) within a short time, like **2 hours**.

This often leads to intense **anxiety, guilt, shame, or sadness**. In contrast, **subjective binges** or **overeating** (e.g., at **Christmas** or **social meals**) are **occasional, normal behaviours without** the same **loss of control** or **emotional distress**.

Binge-Restrict Cycle ^{44,45}



What are some main triggers of BED?

Physical hunger

One of the **main triggers** for binge eating is **restrictive behaviours**, such as **cutting back on food variety or amount**, to 'diet' or **change your body shape**. **Skipping meals** or **not eating enough** during the day can leave your body **low on energy** and **nutrients**, **increasing the urge** to binge to **make up for any shortfalls**.

Psychological hunger and distress

Sometimes people can **binge eat** when attempting to follow certain **restrictive food rules** or **dieting** (mental restriction), or as a way of **copng with emotional pain** and **intense feelings**, whether **negative** or **positive**.

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What are some of the health impacts of BED?

Physical health problems

The continuous overconsumption of food, **more** than the body needs can result in **unstable blood sugars**, **excessive weight gain** leading to **obesity**¹¹, and the risk of developing certain **chronic conditions** such as **heart disease**¹², **type 2 diabetes**¹³, **gastrointestinal disorders**¹⁴ (e.g. acid reflux and chronic constipation), **Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS)**¹⁵, and certain **cancers**¹⁶.

Negative emotions

Binge eating can result in people feeling **distressed**, **guilty** or a **sense of shame**, which can result in harsh **self-criticism**. This **increases the chances** of engaging in **repeated binge and restricting episodes**, referred to as the **binge-restrict cycle** (see diagram on the binge-restrict cycle).

Is there a link between a plant-based or vegan diet and BED?

While there is **no definitive link** between BED and a plant-based or vegan diet, eating disorders can be seen in a variety of people with **different dietary patterns**.

This has led to the **wrong association** between **plant-based diets** and **disordered eating** in the medical literature.

Plant-based diets are **naturally lower in calorie density**, which can **help with weight management**. However, **any diet** can **potentially become restrictive** and **contribute to disordered eating**.

Myth 2

Finding the **right weight loss plan** will **cure** binge eating disorder.

Fact:

Binge eating disorder is a **mental health illness** and requires a **specialised medical health service** and **treatment plan** by **trained medical professionals**.



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Can you follow a plant-based diet while still having an eating disorder?

Many people who experience eating disorders can and do follow a plant-based or vegan diet. However, this depends on the **individual** and their **reasons** for following a plant-based diet and should be **assessed with the help of their health care provider**.

There is some research suggesting a **decreased risk** of **certain eating disorder behaviours** when following a **plant-based** or **vegan** diet¹⁸⁻²¹, however **more research is needed** in this area.

Practical and consistent changes in our **behaviours** and **food choices** with the **right support** are sometimes enough to **break the repeated cycle** of bingeing and restricting.

There are however **specific and clinically recognised treatment options** available for **BED**, including **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)**, which is considered the **primary treatment option** for **BED**^{22,23}.

How a plant-based diet can help nourish your body and mind

Disease prevention

A **plant-based dietary pattern** has been shown to be effective in **reducing the risk** of common **chronic lifestyle-related conditions** linked to **BED**, such as **obesity**²⁴, **heart disease**²⁵ and **type 2 diabetes**²⁶.

Maintaining a healthy weight

Eating a predominantly or exclusively **plant-based diet** has also been shown to be the **most effective** way of achieving a **healthy weight** and **BMI** and associated with a **lower tendency** to engage in **dieting and binge behaviours**²⁷⁻²⁹.

Myth 3

People who binge just need **more willpower**.

Fact:

More willpower is **not going to help** someone with **BED** stop engaging in binge episodes. The condition is a **mental health disorder** requiring **medical help**.

Mindful eating

A **vegan diet** has also been shown to **improve** one's relationship with **food** and **food choices** encouraging **mindful eating** (i.e. paying attention to our food, on purpose, moment by moment engaging all the senses, **without judgement or self-criticism**)³⁴.

Regulating mood disorders

Research shows that a **plant-based dietary pattern** **rich** in **antioxidants**, with **increased fruit and vegetables**, **whole grains**, **pulses**, **nuts** and **seeds** has been shown to **help reduce symptoms** of **mild depression** and **anxiety**, **regulating mood quality and emotional well-being**³⁰⁻³³.

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Top 10 tips for reducing binge episodes on a plant-based diet

1 Nourish your body and brain with enough food throughout the day.

Recognising your natural hunger cues or signals will help this (see diagram on hunger cues). A **well-planned plant-based diet** tends to be **higher** in nutrients, e.g. vitamins, minerals, antioxidants giving overall **nourishment** to your body and mind.

2 Have a regular eating routine.

Skipping meals **increases** your chances of food cravings and hunger, which can lead to a binge episode. Having a **structured daily meal pattern** with **3 meals** and **2-3 snacks**, eating regular, nutrient-dense meals and snacks will help **reduce** a binge episode.



3 Choose foods high in fibre and protein

Balancing your plate with fibre and protein-rich foods will help you **feel fuller** and **more satiated**, **reducing** the urge to binge. For more information on higher plant protein foods please check out our [fact sheet here](#).

4 Focusing on key nutrients

Individuals with **BED** can have **insufficient** levels of certain **nutrients** such as **Vitamin D** and **Omega-3 fats**³⁵⁻³⁷, both of which are linked to **mood regulation**³⁸⁻⁴¹. Focusing on **plant foods** and **fortified food products rich** in these nutrients and taking an **appropriate supplement** recommended by your **health care provider** will help reduce any risk of deficiencies.

5 Tackle food anxiety

One way to overcome **certain foods** that can **trigger** a binge is by **making a list** and attempting to **reintroduce** them into **your diet one by one**, in a certain portion or amount.

Asking a friend or loved one for **support** can help make the experience **easier**.



7 Get moving

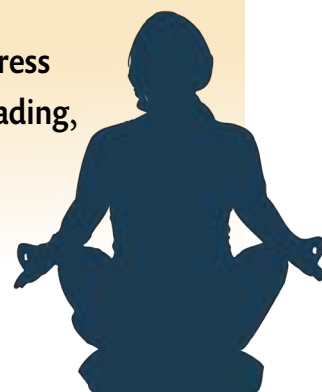
Engaging in **frequent exercise** alongside a **plant-rich diet** can help **significantly improve mood** by **releasing endorphins** (happiness hormones), **reducing** anxiety levels and creating a feeling of **wellbeing**. (e.g. **yoga** has been clinically shown to help **reduce binges**⁴², walking in nature, dancing, lifting weights⁴³).

6 Ditch the dieting

Dieting mentality usually involves **having small portions** or **under eating** and **restricting certain foods** which can **increase binge behaviours**. Seeking help from a **qualified dietitian** or **nutritionist** specialising in eating disorders, around **adequate portion sizes**, food choices and meals, can **help you** make **better overall sustainable decisions** and **break** the binge eating cycle.

8 Managing stress

Adding **tools** to help manage stress and anxiety (e.g. **journalling**, **reading**, **deep breathing** and practising **mindfulness**).



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Top 10 tips for reducing binge episodes on a plant-based diet continued...

9 Eating with friends and family

Eating around others can be a **tool** in recovery as it helps to normalise **positive** eating behaviours, building a feeling of **support** and **community** and **restoring** your relationship with food.

Exercise self-compassion

Whether choosing to follow a plant-based or vegan diet for health, ethical or compassionate reasons, it's important to mirror this behaviour by being patient and having compassion for yourself, which is one step closer in the journey to recovery.

10

Recognising your hunger and fullness signals

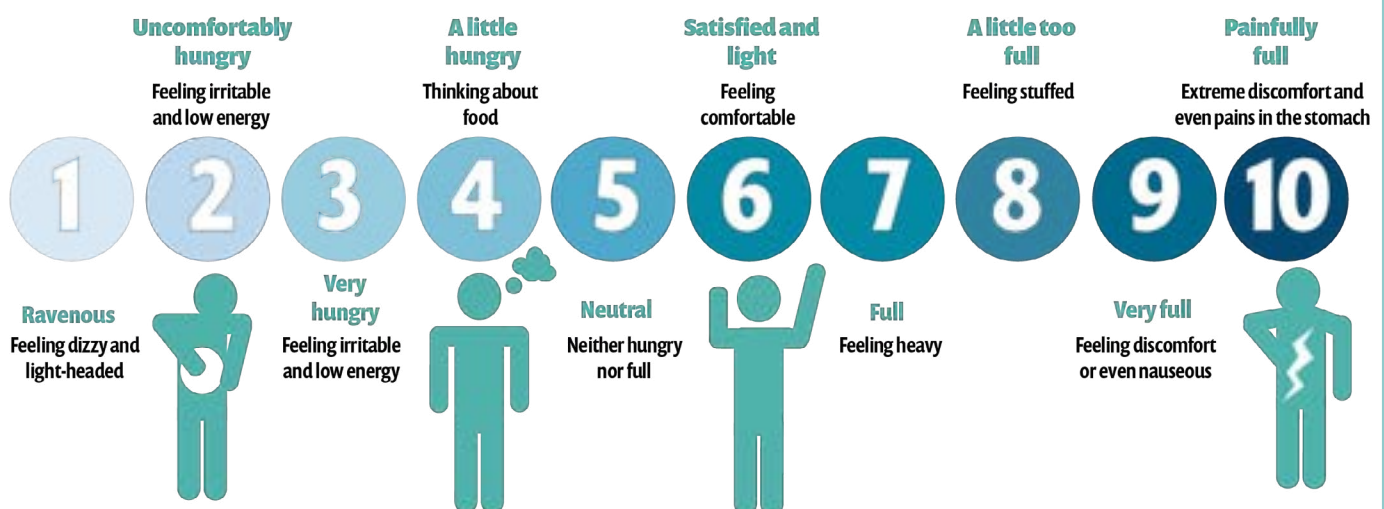
People who have binged for a considerable period of time may find that their hunger and fullness cues are difficult to sense. Through repeated cycles of bingeing and restricting, hunger and fullness can feel like extreme sensations.

Recognising your hunger and fullness cues again will help restore your body's natural ability to help regulate and restore your eating pattern.

Tip

The **hunger fullness scale** is an eating tool that's used to better understand and give language to the different levels of **hunger** and **fullness**, so you are **better able** to **respond** to your needs.

The hunger fullness scale



Firstly...

try to identify where you might be on the scale at any given time (**don't worry** if you find it difficult at first – go with what feels right for you).



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For hunger cues

It may be a smart idea to **start eating** at a **3** or **4** where this is **not** an uncomfortable level of hunger, and you can make **rational** and intentional **choices** about **what** and **how much** to eat.

For fullness cues

Different levels are appropriate for different situations.

A **7** on the scale is usually considered an **ideal stopping point** for most of the time. However, there may be times that **8** is more appropriate during the times you are going **out to eat with family or friends**. Or you may just miss the mark that time and feel a little too full, **that is ok**.

Myth 4

Binge eating only affects adults.

Fact:

BED affects all ages and has **increased significantly** within **young adults** and **teenagers** in the past year.

The hunger scale is just a tool not a rule.



Hunger and hormones

To understand **why** you may binge, it is important to understand the **link** between **hunger hormones** and your **overall food intake**.

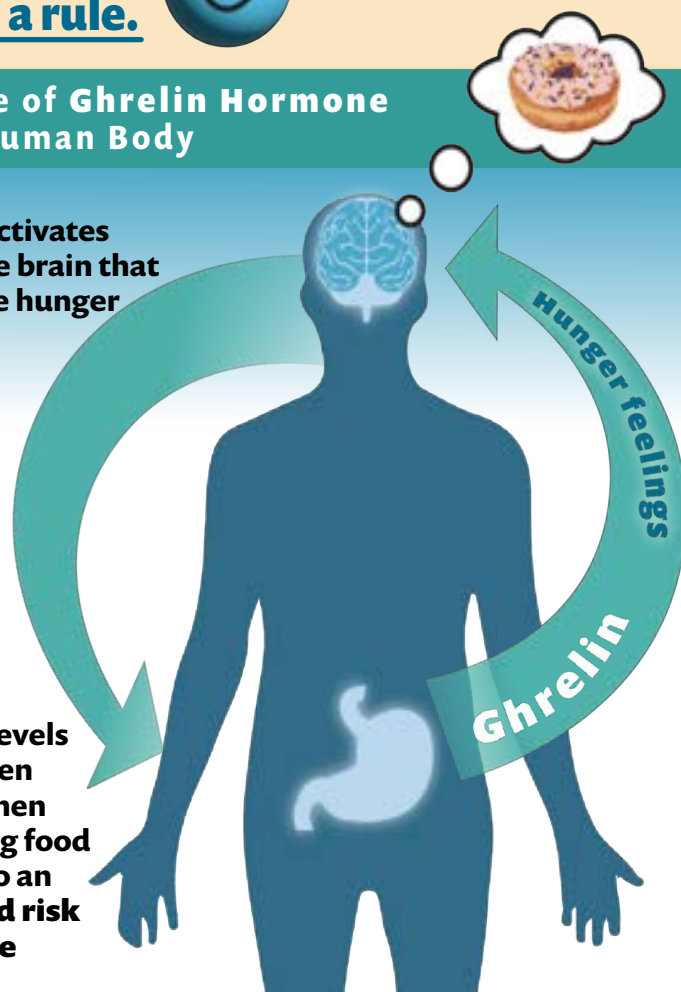
Ghrelin is a hormone we naturally produce that causes you to feel hungry.

When we **eat enough**, the levels of **ghrelin** in our body naturally become **low** and levels of **Leptin**, the hormone that causes you to feel full become **high**).

The Role of Ghrelin Hormone in the Human Body

Ghrelin activates part of the brain that causes the hunger sensation

Ghrelin levels can be even higher when restricting food leading to an increased risk of a Binge



When we **restrict** and **do not eat enough** at a given time, **ghrelin** is **continuously released** and **Leptin** is **decreased**, leading to us **feeling constantly hungry** and can **increase** the chances of **bingeing**⁴⁴.

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Foods naturally high in protein and fibre

Meal Ideas

Foods naturally higher in protein and fibre will help keep you more satiated/full and less likely to have food cravings.

Foods high in protein typically have a protein amount of at least 15-20g per portion.

Here are some recipe ideas for the day. Please note these are estimates.

Breakfast ideas



Oat and Chia seed pudding:

¾ cup of oats + tablespoon of chia seeds with tablespoon of nut butter or chopped walnuts and berries with 1 cup of fortified soya milk
= 21g of protein



Tofu scramble:

1 cup firm tofu with veggies (peppers, onions)
Toppings: Nutritional yeast and avocado
= 20g of protein



Lunch ideas



Chickpea quinoa salad:

½ cup of cooked quinoa, ½ cup of chickpeas, cucumber, tomatoes mixed with seasoned dressing = 14g of protein



Lentil and vegetable soup

1 cup of cooked red lentils, cup of carrots, ½ cup of celery, ½ cup of tomatoes, seasoned spices (cumin, coriander)
= 20g of protein

Tempeh and hummus

veggie wrap:

50g of tempeh, 2 tablespoons of hummus, ½ cup of mix veggies with leafy greens, x1 wholemeal wheat wrap
= 22g of protein



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Dinner ideas



Black bean and sweet potato burrito

½ cup of black beans, ½ cup of sweet potato, x1 wholegrain tortilla wrap. ¼ avocado
= 19g of protein



Stir-fry tofu with brown rice

1 cup of tofu, mixed veggies, (broccoli, carrots, peppers), 1 cup of brown rice
= 20g of protein



Lentil Bolognese with whole grain pasta

¾ cup of cooked lentil, 1 cup of whole wheat pasta, tomato sauce with veggies
= 20g of protein

Binge eating disorder

quick guide signs

- Eating until **uncomfortably full**
- A feeling of **loss of control** around eating
- Eating much **more rapidly** than normal
- Eating **large amounts** of food (2- 3 times more than average) in one eating event even when not physically hungry
- Intense **feelings of guilt** or **shame** or **discust** after eating

✓ TOP TIPS CHECKLIST

- ☐ Eat regularly and avoid skipping meals
- ☐ Eat when you are hungry
- ☐ Practice mindful eating
- ☐ Learn to recognise hunger cues (using the hunger scale tool)
- ☐ Tackle your trigger foods - with support around you
- ☐ Try to move more - it will help your mood!
- ☐ Be patient and kind to yourself and practice self-compassion daily!

Further information resources:

UK: <https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/>

Ireland: <https://bodywhys.ie/>

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