BINGE EATING DISORDER: An Interplay between Behavior & Nutrition

We all overeat from time to time, such as having “seconds” at dinner or having dessert when you’re already full. But for binge eaters, overeating is common and feels uncontrollable. Among those that struggle with binging, eating has become a method to cope with stress and other negative emotions. Those negative emotions combined with the biochemical influence that processed/high sugar foods have on hormones and mood makes it increasingly challenging to break the behavioral pattern of binging.

Binge eating may be comforting for a brief moment, but then reality sets back in, along with regret and self-loathing. This behavioral pattern may have also been shaped by a history of yo-yo dieting.

Binge eating often leads to weight gain and obesity, which only reinforces an emotional state of frustration and loss of control. Ironically, the worse a binge eater feels about him or herself and their appearance, the more likely they are to use food as a coping mechanism. It becomes a vicious cycle: eating to feel better, feeling even worse, and then turning back to food for relief. However, as out of control one may feel, Binge Eating Disorder (BED) is treatable. With the right help and support, you can learn to control your eating and develop a healthy relationship with food.

Physical Signs of Binge Eating Disorder

- Weight gain often leading to obesity
- Constant weight fluctuations
- Weight fluctuation related to muscle mass loss
- Lowered RMR (Resting Metabolic Rate - metabolism)
- Type 2 Diabetes
- Skin disorders
- High cholesterol
- High blood pressure
- Heart disease and stroke
- Certain types of cancer
- Gallbladder disease
- Kidney disease
- Liver disease
- Osteoarthritis
- Joint and muscle pain
- Gastrointestinal problems
- Sleep apnea
- Irregular periods, infertility (women)
- Complications during pregnancy
Defining Binge Eating Disorder
BED is an eating disorder characterized by:

- Recurrent episodes of eating large quantities of food (often very quickly and to the point of discomfort).
- A feeling of a loss of control during the binge (including a sense of not being present or on autopilot).
- Experiencing shame, distress or guilt afterwards.
- Not regularly using unhealthy compensatory measures (such as purging or the use of laxatives or excessive exercise as is characteristic of Bulimia Nervosa), to counter the binge eating.

Binge Eating Disorder is a severe, life-threatening and treatable eating disorder. BED is the most common eating disorder in the United States, affecting 3.5% of women, 2% of men, (Hudson, 2007) and up to 1.6% of adolescents. (Swanson, 2011)

Causes & Risk Factors of Binge Eating Disorder

Like other eating disorders, the precise cause of BED is unknown, however, there is evidence that Binge Eating Disorder may result from a mix of genetic, biochemical, psychological, emotional, and social factors.

**Biological causes of Binge Eating Disorder:** Biological abnormalities can contribute to binge eating.

- The hypothalamus (the part of the brain that controls appetite) may send wrong signals about hunger and fullness resulting in uncontrolled eating. (Sauro, 2008)
- There is evidence that low levels of the brain chemical serotonin may play a role in compulsive eating. Serotonin is a neurotransmitter or chemical messenger in the brain that causes a feeling of well-being and relaxation, and reduces hunger. (Monteleone, 2006)
- The peripheral hormones such as leptin and insulin, cholecystokinin, glucagon-like peptide-1, peptide YY(3-36), and ghrelin are involved in the signals of hunger and fullness. Research suggests that BED is related to a dysfunction in the ghrelin signaling system. (Hellströmå, 2004)
- Other biological systems that play a role in BED are the opioidergic and gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA) systems. The opioidergic system appears to be responsible for a subtype of obesity associated with BED. (Matthew, 2004)
- Researchers have also found a genetic mutation that appears to cause food addiction. (Volkow, 2005)
**Biochemical causes of Binge Eating Disorder:** In many cases of BED, there is an underlying biochemical issue, such as a combination of food sensitivity, blood sugar imbalance and nutrient deficiency.

- We often crave the foods that we are sensitive or "allergic" too. These sensitivities are intolerances, often inherited, and show up in any number of ways, for example, depression, inability to lose weight, eating disorders, tinnitus, unexplained aches and pains, to name a few. The very foods we crave will create the most symptoms and are the most damaging. In fact, food cravings are similar to addiction. As you withdraw from the foods you're addicted to, you begin to have withdrawal symptoms resulting in craving. If that trigger food is grains, wheat or baked goods, you can never get enough of them, so you binge on them, despite your best intentions to the contrary. The reason this happens is that when a food allergy causes stress, your body produces endorphins, which comfort you and make you feel good. Unfortunately you perpetuate exposure to the irritant because you want more of the compensatory good feelings. (Helm, 2000)

- One mechanism underlying the BED cycle is blood sugar imbalance. Low blood sugar can set off the craving, resulting in a binge. The brain experiences this dip as life-threatening starvation, followed by a frantic search for whatever will raise blood sugar. The quickest fixes tend to be sugary foods or other refined carbs such as bread or pastries. (Benton, 2002)

- It takes more than will power to break the BED cycle. In addition to avoiding unhealthy foods, you have to supply the body with a good, supportive nutritional program of healthful food, vitamins, minerals, and amino acids. A nutrient rich diet, and good vitamin and mineral formula, can actually stop the cycle. In fact, once the diet and nutrients are in place, the cravings and addictions will often just fall away. Remember that nutritional supplements should not replace healthy food, but rather, if taken, are intended just as the name implies: “supplemental” to a healthy diet.

### Psychological Signs of Binge Eating
- Feeling stress or tension only relieved by eating
- Embarrassment over how much you’re eating
- Feeling numb while bingeing, as if you are not present or on auto-pilot
- Never feeling satisfied, no matter how much you eat
- Feeling guilty or depressed after overeating
- Disgust or self-hatred about eating behaviors
- Desperation to control weight and eating habits
- Low self-esteem, self-loathing and embarrassment over physical appearance
- Self-harm or suicide attempts
- Overly sensitive to references about weight or appearance
- Chronic depression
- Chronic grief
- Anxiety
- Shame

### Behavioral Signs of Binge Eating
- Frequently eating an abnormal amount of food in a short period of time (usually less than two hours)
- Inability to stop eating or control what you’re eating often to the point of feeling uncomfortably full
- Rapidly eating large amounts of food (frequently chewing without swallowing)
- Eating even when full or not physically hungry
- Hiding, stockpiling or hoarding food to eat later in secret ("secretive eating habits")
- Frequently eating alone
- Eating late at night
- Hiding empty food containers
- Eating normally in public but gorging when alone
- Eating continuously throughout the day, with no planned mealtimes
- Frequent dieting without weight loss
**Psychological causes of Binge Eating Disorder:** One of the most common reasons for binge eating is an attempt to manage unpleasant emotions. When you have a bad day, it can seem like food is your only friend. Binge eating can temporarily make feelings such as stress, sadness, anxiety, depression, and boredom evaporate into thin air. But the relief is only very fleeting.

- BED has been linked to depression and anxiety. Many binge eaters are either depressed or have been before; others may have trouble with impulse control and managing and expressing their feelings.
- One of the most common reasons for binge eating is an attempt to manage unpleasant emotions such as stress. Stressful events, such as moving to a new job or school, death of a friend or relative, moving to a new place or house can sometimes cause people to binge eat.
- Low self-esteem, loneliness, and body dissatisfaction may also contribute to binge eating.
- Some other emotions such as anger, boredom, worry, anxiety or sadness may also trigger binge-eating episodes.

**Social and Family pressures:**
- Social pressure to be thin can add to the shame binge eaters feel and fuel their emotional eating. Therefore, in some people, social pressure of achieving a thin body can conversely make them to start binge eating. Such people have a feeling of shame and guilt, which may further fuel their emotional eating.
- Some parents unwittingly set the stage for binge eating by using food to comfort, dismiss, or reward their children.
- Painful childhood experiences, such as family issues and critical comments about shape, weight, or eating, may make some people more vulnerable to the disorder, as are those who have been sexually abused in childhood.
- Many people suffering from BED are socially stigmatized since this disorder is a frequently misunderstood disease. Greater public awareness that BED is a real diagnosis that should not be conflated with occasional overeating, is necessary in order to ensure that every person suffering from BED has the opportunity to access resources, treatment, and support for recovery.

**Is Recovery from Binge Eating Disorder Possible?** BED is a very serious eating disorder, particularly if it is accompanied by co-occurring disorders. Like Bulimia, Anorexia, and other eating disorders, Binge Eating Disorder is a medical disease that can result in irreversible health complications, including death. While there are many things you can do to help yourself or a loved one stop binge eating, it is also important to seek professional support and treatment. Those who have BED no longer need to suffer and struggle in the darkness. Recognition, validation, treatment and hope are the cornerstones of all treatment.

**REFERENCES**


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