

**What to do when  
someone tells you they  
have bulimia**

*"When Ali first confessed to me she had bulimia I was a mess. I just had no idea what to do, say or think.*

*All I knew was that I loved her and would stop at nothing to help her.*

*In reflection I look back on that day as a really special moment between us as it became the first big step on her road to recovery and it also opened up a deeper dialog of honesty between us.*

*No one is perfect; we all have problems, insecurities and issues. But to be able to open up, to be fully honest, to bare your soul to a loved one and say "this is me" takes true courage and bravery. It truly is a beautiful moment.*

*No doubt you have a lot of questions, concerns and worries. Hopefully this little booklet will help clarify a thing or two for you.*

*Also, feel free to share this booklet with anyone who might find it useful."*

*Yours in recovery,*

*Richard Kerr*

*♥ Ali*

[www.bulimiahelp.org](http://www.bulimiahelp.org)

Ali & Richard Kerr  
Bulimiahelp.org founders



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# Understanding your own feelings, fears and reactions

We understand that **you can feel a whole range of emotions when a loved one confides in you that they have bulimia**. When they first broke the news to you maybe you were surprised, uncomfortable, confused, or worried. Perhaps despite how much you love them you found yourself becoming angry, scared and unsure of what to say. You may have even cried or found yourself completely lost for words.

On the flip side perhaps you tried your best to listen and be understanding and compassionate. Maybe you asked your loved one lots of questions or maybe their news wasn't that big of a shock for you because you had previously worried that they had bulimia.

Thinking back to your initial reaction to your loved one's news you may wish you could have reacted in a different way or asked different questions.

**You must keep in mind that no matter how you responded that was just your INITIAL REACTION to the news.**

It's important to **see talking about bulimia and recovery as a gradual process**. Understand that it will take many conversations and continual communication before you will feel truly comfortable discussing bulimia and recovery with your loved one. Don't worry you will get there!

**Now it is important to focus on your future reactions, conversations and interactions with your loved one.** You couldn't possibly have prepared for your initial reaction, but you can now prepare for future reactions.

**To do this it is important that you:**

- Begin to understand what it really means to live with bulimia,
- Begin to actively understand what recovery is all about.
- Begin to understand the things that you can do to help and support your loved one.
- Start to challenge any previous misconceptions you may have had about bulimia.

This won't be easy of course. You may become overwhelmed at first because there will be a lot to take in. You may find things especially hard if you know you reacted badly or in an unsupportive way initially. Take a moment to look at some of the initial reactions our members at Bulimia Help experienced in recovery:

*"Told my husband yesterday I suffer from bulimia, and he responded "no u do not!, it is hard to start a journey without the support of your husband" (Bulimia Help Member 2011)*

*"I made the mistake yesterday of revealing to a close friend that I was actively seeking out help. Her response? "Oh, you're not doing THAT again, are you? Stop it, or it won't be any fun to drink with you anymore." I really don't think I'm going to tell anyone else for a while, though it would have been nice to have the support." (Bulimia Help Member, 2009)*

*"My mum has known for years and years I have an eating disorder. However, she never did anything to help and I think was in denial. She read up stuff about it but still doesn't understand what it means to live with an eating disorder. She believes me when I tell her I'm fine" (Bulimia Help Member, 2009)*

These responses show denial, lack of understanding of bulimia and lack of active support and understanding. If you found yourself responding in a similar way to the examples above you may have upset your loved one BUT it does not mean that you can't now take appropriate steps to support them in recovery.

**TIP:** Consider talking to your loved one about your own reaction the next time you are given the chance. As you continue to read through this booklet you will learn a little about the reality of bulimia together with what is involved in recovery.

# UNDERSTANDING BULIMIA

## What is Bulimia?

If you've ever tried to look up a definition for bulimia you have probably come across something like this:

*“Bulimia nervosa is an eating disorder where the main feature is binge eating followed by purging (purging refers to unhealthy behaviors that compensate for binge eating in order to prevent weight gain)”*

The truth is definitions of bulimia are so blunt and unfeeling, often they can give people who've never experienced bulimia a really misconceived idea of what it's all really about.

**These sentences will help you to get a better understanding of what it's really like to live with bulimia:**

- When you have bulimia you are totally out of control. You experience such strong binge urges that you simply don't know how to stop them.
- When you have bulimia life becomes a tiring show, where you constantly put on a happy face to hide your dark secret.
- When you have bulimia you try to use large amounts of food as comfort to numb difficult thoughts, feelings and emotions that you don't feel able to cope with.
- When you have bulimia your body is in a constant state of distressed hunger despite bingeing on large amounts of food.
- When you have bulimia it's hard to imagine how you will cope without it.

- When you have bulimia it's hard to be around other people.
- When you have bulimia your emotions and moods can be really erratic.
- When you have bulimia you can end up saying things you don't mean and doing things you wish you could take back.
- When you have bulimia all you want is to be free from it.
- When you have bulimia you are usually average or above average weight.
- When you have bulimia you can be simply too exhausted to have any other interests or hobbies.
- When you have bulimia you often experience heightened levels of stress, anxiety and depression.
- When you have bulimia you feel very alone, scared, afraid, guilty and ashamed.
- When you have bulimia you often feel like you have an addiction.
- When you have bulimia your brain reacts to food binges and purging in very similar ways to the way a drug addict's brain would react to taking drugs.
- When you have bulimia on the outside your life can appear perfect and normal.
- When you have bulimia there are hardly any visible signs and the signs that are visible are not what you would think.
- When you have bulimia you can exhibit other compulsive urges. For example you can be more likely to shoplift, be promiscuous or drink a lot of alcohol. Bulimia is not an excuse for these behaviours but it is a reason.

Many people believe bulimia is a coping mechanism. At Bulimia Help we try to teach our members that they will be much more able to cope with emotional pain once they break free from bulimia. But:

**RECOVERY IS A VERY GRADUAL PROCESS**



At this time one of **the most important things you can try to do is to let go of any preconceived ideas you may have about what bulimia is.** Learning about the true nature of bulimia and the ways in which it impacts the life of your loved one is essential. People with bulimia are often very hurt when others presume bulimia is a diet, a fad or something they can control or have chosen.

**Recognize that your loved ones bulimia is NOT their choice, but recovery IS their choice.**

**Your love, support and understanding could go a very long way in helping them to recover for life.**

## **Understanding the terminology associated with bulimia**

There are lots of words that we use to describe behaviors in people with bulimia. If you're unfamiliar with bulimia and eating disorders then sometimes these terms and phrases can be confusing.

In this section we will talk about some of the main words and terms we use when talking about bulimia and bulimic behaviors so you can start to understand exactly what they mean.

<b>TERM/PHRASE</b>	<b>MEANING</b>
<b>Binge/Bingeing/Binge Eating</b>	The word bingeing relates to a period of excessive and uncontrolled indulgence in food. When someone with bulimia

binges they consume a large amount of food in a very short time. People with bulimia may binge a few times a week or multiple times per day.

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**Purge/Purging**

Someone with bulimia may purge by self induced vomiting, laxative or diuretic abuse, fasting for long periods of time or compulsively over exercising. In rare cases when a person has type 1 diabetes they can purge by refusing to inject their insulin. Purging is a compensatory behaviour that helps someone with bulimia to compensate for a large food binge. Sometimes people can use a combination of purging methods.

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**Restrict/Restricting**

When we talk about restricting we are referring to when a person limits their food intake. They may limit their calorie intake, or limit the specific types of foods or food groups that they eat.

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**Fast/Fasting**

Fasting is when someone goes for a very long time without eating. Sometimes people with bulimia may go for days without eating. People with bulimia may fast for extended periods after bingeing.

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**Diuretic Abuse**

A diuretic helps to release fluid from the body. Sometimes people with bulimia abuse diuretics in an attempt to lower their body weight or compensate for bingeing.

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**Laxative Abuse**

Laxatives stimulate evacuation of the bowels. Often people with bulimia will abuse laxatives by taking very large doses in order to try and compensate for binges.

**Compulsive Over Exercising**

This refers to an extreme amount of exercise. Sometimes people with bulimia will frantically exercise for unhealthy amounts of time in order to try to compensate for a binge.

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**Distressed Hunger**

When we talk about distressed hunger we mean a state that the body can get into when it has been deprived of food and essential nutrients for a very long time. Most people with bulimia are in distressed hunger states. Distressed hunger can cause very powerful binge urges and it can take around 6 months to fully get over it.

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**Slow Metabolism**

When someone has a slow metabolism it means their body is not that good at converting the food they eat into energy. Before starting recovery many bulimics will have slower metabolisms.

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**Structured Eating**

Structured eating is a method that people in recovery from bulimia use to learn how to eat normally again. It involves eating three meals and three snacks each day. It means eating every 3 hours by the clock until natural hunger signals can be restored.

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**Intuitive Eating**

Intuitive eating is a method of eating where a person knows they can trust their body to tell them what to eat and how much to eat. The ultimate aim of recovery is for people to learn how to eat intuitively but this is a very advanced stage of recovery.

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**Relapse**

A relapse refers to a time when someone with bulimia may

“slip” and binge or purge (usually both). Relapses are challenging but they are a perfectly normal part of recovery. Relapse can actually provide important learning experiences and they do not mean that recovery is not working.

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**Binge food**

Binge foods usually consist of calorie dense, sugar and carbohydrate rich foods. However it's important to understand that different people will consider different things “binge foods.” A binge can consist of any foods and the size of a binge will vary from person to person.

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**Triggers**

When we talk about triggers in relation to bulimia we mean any places, people, foods, situations or feelings that can cause an increase in binge urges. What triggers one bulimic may not trigger another so it can be important to take some time to understand your loved one's triggers.

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**Trigger food**

Trigger foods can be similar to binge foods. Often your loved one will associate certain foods with bingeing or high anxiety. They may feel that they can not control themselves around these foods. It's fine to support them in initial avoidance of trigger foods however it is important to acknowledge that the main aim of recovery is to make no foods off-limits.

## Who does bulimia affect and what causes it?

The truth is that **anyone can suffer with bulimia**. It does not discriminate against age, gender, religion, sexuality or nationality. We often associate eating disorders with adolescent girls, and while it is true that a lot of people with bulimia tend to be younger women, it's important to remember that:

**Absolutely ANYONE can develop bulimia AT ANY TIME in their lives.**

Establishing exactly what causes bulimia is very difficult. If you were to ask 100 people with bulimia why they have bulimia, you would almost certainly get 100 different answers back. Many people don't even understand why they have developed bulimia in the first place.

Everywhere we look we hear different theories, treatments and attitudes. Searching for answers in text books certainly doesn't seem to help much. If you've ever tried to look into the causes of bulimia you have undoubtedly seen the same message repeated over and over:

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***“Biological, environmental, and psychological factors are associated with the development of bulimia nervosa.”***

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This is basically saying that:

*“Your loved ones Bulimia could be caused by anything really because there is no conclusive evidence”*

The phrase **“no conclusive evidence,”** means people don't know what causes bulimia.

A large amount of evidence however does point to the fact that bulimia is related to something very, very, simple indeed and this is, your loved one is not eating enough food.

Of course there are psychological and emotional factors to consider too, but at Bulimia Help we have proven that when people with bulimia learn how to eat normally again – at first by using structured eating – they are able to reverse many of the psychological symptoms associated with bulimia.

Many of our members find that learning to eat normally and re-balancing their bodies by providing the nutrition that they need totally cures them of their bulimia.

The important thing to remember in all of this is that you really shouldn't put the blame on your self or your loved one. It is **not your fault** that your loved one has bulimia.

We understand that parents especially can feel guilty but you must trust in the fact that you have not contributed to the development of your child's eating disorder.

If you would like to learn more about the Bulimia Recovery System BRS® and our unique and proven recovery methods then please visit [www.bulimiahelp.org](http://www.bulimiahelp.org) for further information.

**Remember the more informed you can become the easier it will be for you to understand what your loved one is going through and what you can do to support them during recovery.**

# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

## “They don’t look sick, is it really that serious?”

We understand that it can be hard to break free from common misconceptions relating to people with eating disorders. So many people believe that when someone has a serious eating disorder such as bulimia they should appear to be very weak and underweight.

**The reality of bulimia is that majority of sufferers tend to be average or above average weight.** In fact it is quite rare for someone with bulimia to be very underweight. Some people may even gain weight after they develop bulimia and lose weight in recovery.

There are some subtle visible signs that appear when someone has bulimia, but unless you’ve experienced bulimia yourself or done a lot of in-depth research they can be almost impossible to spot. Rather than having the very underweight and withdrawn image that society often associates with eating disorders **people with bulimia can appear to be in perfect health** (on the outside at least).

Bulimia does cause sufferers to develop a swollen face, brittle and dull hair skin and nails, bloodshot eyes and broken capillaries on the face. But I’m sure you’ll agree they can be very easy things to hide and miss.

People with bulimia can be high achievers, most have successful jobs and lives, some are even parents and hold together their families very well. It’s important for you to realize how little someone’s exterior actually portrays what is going on inside.

There is just no way to judge the severity of someone's bulimia based on their appearance.

## **“What does recovery involve and will it be a life-long battle?”**

I'm sure that you are anxious to start learning about the recovery process. The truth is that there is a lot to take in, so the best advice is to try to learn about recovery gradually. This will be a continual process and you should expect your loved ones recovery to take some time.

At Bulimia Help we show our members that the secret to recovery is all about learning how to remove all urges to binge. For your loved one recovery is all about:

- 1. Learning to re-balance their body.**
  - 2. Learning to accept ALL of their feelings and emotions.**
  - 3. Re-awakening and starting to listen to their intuition.**
- By doing these three things your loved one can learn how to totally remove all binge urges from their life - forever!**

## **It is a very common misconception that recovery has to be a life long battle...**

Both sufferers, their families and even professionals often comment on this. We don't buy into that for a second. Of course there is no quick fix, recovery takes time but eventually we know that a full life long recovery is possible for all.



When your loved one is fully recovered from bulimia they will no longer have the urge, desire or want to binge. They will experience unimaginable freedom! You can help to encourage, support and motivate your loved one through the harder days and celebrate their successes and achievements with them along the way.

## “How long does it take someone to recover from bulimia?”

At Bulimia Help we ask members to give it AT LEAST six months. The Benefits of recovery can be seen almost immediately but it does take time to re-balance and fully break free from all bulimic behaviors. You can play a very important role in your loved ones recovery by re-assuring them that perseverance will pay off in the end.

Most of our members report that it took between 12-18 months for them to feel 100% recovered. That can be daunting at the start of recovery, but when you think about the bigger picture, no matter how long recovery takes it will always be worth it for the freedom that your loved one will experience in the end.

## “If someone really wanted to recover surely they’d just stop?”

Unfortunately, like we touched on earlier there is just no such thing as a quick fix for bulimia. **No matter how much someone wants to get better it can be impossible to “just stop”**. Instead at Bulimia Help we encourage small, gradual and manageable changes that can create positive effects and changes for life.

Recovery takes time. You should expect your loved one to experience unpredictable and erratic hunger for a number of months because biological reconditioning takes time.

Try to not feel disheartened by the amount of time it may take your loved one to recover. You can be there for them by understanding this process will take time and helping them to prepare for the inevitable ups and downs along the way.

## **“Is it my fault that they have bulimia?”**

It is very important for all friends, families, parents, partners and loved ones to realize that someone having bulimia:

1. Is not your fault
2. Is not your loved ones fault.

**It's understandable that you will want to put blame in specific places** when you are hurting and confused but there is just no place for blame here, especially self-blame. We understand that you may feel guilty. After hearing the news that your loved on has bulimia you may have wondered if there was anything you could have done to prevent it, or worse still if there was anything that you did to trigger their bulimia.

It's normal to feel this way but you need to **learn to let it go**. Instead try and use all of that energy and concern to learn about the things you **CAN DO** to help your loved one rather than worrying about the things you may or may not have done.

# WHAT CAN YOU REALLY DO TO HELP?

## Focus on learning what you CAN do

So often we focus on telling people what they shouldn't do when a loved one is in recovery from bulimia. At Bulimia Help we very much believe in focusing on the positives. With this in mind it's important to consider the ways in which you will be able to be pro-active and supportive to your loved one.

To understand the real ways in which you can help your loved one you will need to constantly communicate with them...

Building a relationship where you both feel comfortable talking about recovery may be difficult at first, but keep at it, the more you practice talking about recovery – together with your thoughts and feelings – the more natural it will become for both of you.

**Different people will want different levels of support.** Your loved one may have just wanted someone to talk to if things got tough in recovery, or in contrast they may hope that you will be there to provide a lot of practical and emotional support along the way. It is important to find out how involved your loved one wants you to be with their recovery and to then respect their wishes.

**Don't be afraid to ask your loved one what you can do to help** but also be prepared for them to tell you that they simply don't know what you can do to help.

Some more general things that you can consider doing to help support your loved one in recovery are:

1. **You can help to provide a safe environment for recovery.** This could be at home, in the workplace or just about anywhere.

**TIP:** Talk to your loved one about the kinds of things that they feel trigger binge urges, then together you can work out how to provide a really safe, trigger-free recovery environment.

2. **You can free up more of your time.** If you are a parent, carer or spouse you can consider quitting or cut back on other obligations to concentrate on supporting your loved one.

**TIP:** Perhaps you could arrange specific times or days of the week where you help your loved one to review their recovery progress and talk about any challenges they have.

3. **Families can support each other practically and on an emotional level.**

Whether its just taking the time to talk to each other about your loved ones struggle or helping to educate other members of the family about bulimia and recovery, this doesn't have to be a time of heartache. You can use this time to solidify those bonds.

4. **Parents and partners may offer financial assistance.** If your loved one needs to cut back on work to focus on recovery and you are their parent you may consider helping to support them for a short time.

5. **You can educate yourself about the realities of bulimia.** There is certainly a lot to learn, don't feel bad if you don't "get it" all straight away. You should try to learn as much as you can about bulimia and recovery.

6. **You can help to break the stigma and silence that surrounds bulimia** by taking steps to educate other friends, family members and the community about bulimia.
7. **You can consider becoming more “recovery friendly.”** Maybe you excessively diet or talk a lot about weight, food and size. Perhaps you like to comfort eat on occasion or live by unhealthy food rules. If you don’t have an eating disorder yourself then you can consider changing your outlook on life in order to help support and re-affirm your loved ones recovery.
8. **When you’ve learned more about eating disorders you can consider getting involved with recovery advocacy** or arrange to meet other parents, friends, families and carer’s who are also supporting people in recovery from bulimia.
9. **You can make personal changes in your own life based on the things you learn about bulimia.** This is similar to becoming “recovery friendly”.
10. **You can be a constant source of strength and friendship.** This is what your loved one wants more than anything. It’s impossible to always have the answers or to know what to do all of the time but never underestimate the power of just being there for your loved one.

## **A note for parents...**

*“Parents, you are probably the most important factor in your son or daughter's recovery. How you respond to this crisis, how you educate yourself, who you choose as support, and how you organize your home life during the recovery process will be critical.”*

*Families often call this important role "the hardest thing I have ever done." They also, when their dearly loved child is restored and moving toward normal development and independence, report feeling well-deserved pride in themselves and their loved one for facing and succeeding in this challenge.*

***Parents do not cause eating disorders, but can be an important and active part of recovery"***

(Feast-ed.org, 2011)

# ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

## At [BulimiaHelp.org](http://BulimiaHelp.org)

The bulimia help community is full of wonderful, strong and inspirational people who are recovering and have recovered from bulimia. With over 8000 members we do tend to have members who are families and loved ones of people with bulimia. You are very welcome to visit Bulimia Help to seek advice, guidance and support in relation to the recovery of your loved one.

Although the Bulimia Recovery System BRS® is specifically designed for sufferers, accessing it could help you to really understand the recovery. If your loved one is a member of Bulimia Help it's a great idea to ask them to show you around the site (if they feel comfortable enough to do this).

### **At Bulimia Help:**

- ✓ You can ask questions or take part in recovery focused group discussions via the forums.
- ✓ You can use the Bulimia Help chat room for real-time support.
- ✓ You can update your personal blog and share recovery experiences.
- ✓ You can build up your online support network by using the extensive Bulimia Help Friendship Network.
- ✓ You can access a whole range of recovery tools that are exclusive to Bulimia Help.
- ✓ You can receive advice on your eating plan from our licenced nutritionist
- ✓ You can access additional support from our BRS® Coach who will help you to achieve all of your recovery goals.

**You can learn more online at [www.bulimiahelp.org](http://www.bulimiahelp.org)**

## Other sources of support...

Remember just like your loved one, you also deserve help and support if you feel that you need it. Here are some great ideas for building up your own support team:

- You can go to your GP and ask for help.
- You can seek support from a counselor or therapist.
- You can contact local and national eating disorder help lines.
- You can get involved with your local eating disorder charities
- You can join a local eating disorder recovery support groups in your area – many of these groups cater to the parents, families and loved ones of those with eating disorders.