What is an eating disorder? Eating disorders (EDs) are serious, life-threatening conditions that affect one's emotional & physical health. While females are more often affected, increasing numbers of males suffer too.

EDs involve an obsession with food, weight & appearance and, without treatment, can damage self esteem & social relationships, lead to mood swings & serious physical health problems.

An eating disorder is NOT simply a problem with food but a symptom of underlying problems. A person might focus on weight to block out other painful or upsetting issues. Food can be a comfort. Conversely, excessive exercise or fasting can be a way of punishing yourself (or others).

ANOREXIA NERVOSA is characterised by self-starvation & excessive weight loss; a preoccupation with food, weight & calories. The person may deny feeling hunger, weigh themselves frequently & exercise obsessively. Main symptoms:

- intense fear of weight gain, even though underweight,
- reluctance to maintain body weight at or above the minimally normal weight for one's age, height & body frame,
- a disturbed image of one's body weight & shape; excessive focus on weight/shape as a measure of self-worth; and denial of the seriousness of low body weight,
- in females, monthly menstrual periods become irregular or stop. In males, erections & wet dreams stop, testicles shrink.

BULIMIA NERVOSA involves repeated binges where you consume a large amount of food – more than most people would eat – in a short period of time. Binges may be triggered by stress; there is often a sense of lack of control during bingeing.

After binging, you feel stuffed, bloated and probably guilty & depressed. You try to get rid of the food by making yourself vomit, using laxatives, diet pills or diuretics. You find yourself trapped in a cycle of binge eating and purging.

Health consequences: If you are not getting enough calories, your metabolism slows down – you may feel tired, weak & cold. Laxative abuse damages muscles in your bowel, causing stomach pain & constipation. Vomiting disturbs the balance of salts in your blood, essential for organ function. This can cause heart palpitations & eventual organ damage, as well as severe dental damage as stomach acid strips tooth enamel.

If left untreated, EDs can lead to serious & life-threatening problems such as heart damage, kidney damage, as well as injury to all parts of the digestive system. In fact, anorexia has the highest death rate of any psychological disorder.

EDs also trigger depression & anxiety disorders. Self esteem tends to suffer, as the person judges his self worth mainly on weight, shape etc. Malnutrition can cause impairments in your ability to concentrate or think clearly, too.

What causes eating disorders?

Psychological Factors include: Low self-esteem; feelings of inadequacy; depression, anxiety, anger, or loneliness. Control: it can be very satisfying to diet & watch the pounds “fall away”. It may be that your weight is the only thing in your life over which you feel you have any control.

Interpersonal Factors include: Troubled family & personal relationships; difficulty expressing emotions & feelings; history of being teased or ridiculed based on size or weight; history of physical or sexual abuse. Family: Mealtimes can be an important time with others, especially family. Accepting food gives pleasure, refusing it will often upset someone. Saying “no” to food may be the only way you can express your feelings, or have any say in family affairs.

Social Factors include: Cultural pressures that glorify "thinness", placing value on obtaining the “perfect body”; cultural norms that value people on the basis of physical appearance & less on inner qualities, strengths.

Worried about someone? Approach the person privately, let him/her know you are worried & mention what you’ve noticed.

Avoid conflicts or a battle of wills. If your friend refuses to acknowledge there is a problem, restate your concerns. Remind him/her that you care & want him/her to be happy.

Avoid shame/guilt game. Instead of accusatory “you” statements (“you just need to eat”) use “I” statements (“I’m concerned about you because you never eat breakfast or lunch” or, “It makes me afraid to hear you vomiting”).

Gather information & resources about eating disorder treatment to share with your friend.
Coping: First, try to be honest about what you are & are not eating, both with yourself and others. Any change towards healthier ways of eating, no matter how small, makes a difference.

If you can’t face eating breakfast, sit at the table for a few minutes & sip some water. When this is ok, have a little to eat – half a slice of toast – but do it every day.

Avoid weighing yourself more than once a week. And don’t spend time checking your body for flaws. Constant checking can make even the most attractive person find something he/she doesn’t like.

If you feel the urge to binge/purge, pause to identify your emotions. In fact, get a journal to jot down your feelings. Record what you eat & when, too. See if there are any links between your feelings & how you eat.

Don’t cut yourself off from others. This can be tempting, especially if everyone is hassling you about being too thin. Instead, find people who help you feel supported & start calling.

Avoid websites that promote unhealthy weight loss. They encourage you to damage your health but won’t help you when you fall ill.

Recovery can be difficult but is possible.

Struggling with an eating disorder is tough. Consider making an appointment to speak with a student counsellor in confidence. Bear in mind, therapy is NOT about forcing you to eat. Therapy helps you understand why you might feel the way you do & is about working with your therapist towards goals you set together.

Self-help stuff
Check out the self-assessment tools on our website. These screens for eating disorders as well as a variety of problems such as depression, alcohol abuse, anxiety & more.
http://sta.uwi.edu/caps/

Other websites about eating disorders:
http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/
http://www.mirror-mirror.org/

How to contact CAPS?
Call: 662 2002 ext 2491.
Email: counsellor@sta.uwi.edu

Or pop in and see us. We are located in the Health Service Unit (HSU), between Trinity Hall and the Learning Resources Centre (LRC).

Opening hours
CAPS is available throughout the year, Mondays to Fridays, from 8:30am to 7pm during term-time. We close at 4:30pm during vacation.

Eating disorders
When food becomes the enemy.
CAPS 662-2002, ext 2491