

Break Free from ED

An Active Guide to Recovering from Your Eating Disorder

Module 6

Eating For Recovery: Part 1

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If you are restricting your food intake, using self-induced vomiting, over-exercising, laxatives or diuretics for weight-control, or have lost weight recently, it is important that you talk to your medical practitioner and get a full medical check-up, as there are many physical complications that can arise as a result.

Introduction

In the previous module, we reviewed the relationship between food intake and energy. This module will focus on taking the first steps toward eating for recovery. We will introduce ways to improve the structure of your eating, the adequacy of what you are eating, and discuss what to expect when you start to change your eating in this way.



What is Normal Eating?

People have different ideas about what normal eating looks like, which is often influenced by early learning experiences, cultural factors, food availability, and beliefs. This can get even more confusing when conflicting messages about diets and nutrition are flooded across mainstream and social media. In these modules, we focus on changing eating behaviours that are driven by weight and shape concerns. That means moving away from dieting and other disordered eating behaviours like over-exercise, vomiting or laxative misuse.

Normal eating will look different for different people. That's because there are many factors that influence a person's energy requirements, including their age, sex, height, metabolic rate, and activity levels. Despite this, **structure** (i.e., regular food intake), **quantity** (i.e., adequate food intake), and **variety** (i.e., eating from multiple food groups) are essential components of normal eating for everyone. This module will focus on improving the structure and quantity of your intake and the next module will focus on improving variety.

Note: When a person is recovering from an eating disorder, they will learn to give themselves permission to eat regularly across the day, consume adequate quantities of food and allow themselves to choose from a wide variety of food groups. Take a look at our 'Regular Eating for Recovery' handout



Improving the Structure of Your Eating

Structure is a term used to describe eating at regular intervals across the day. Establishing structure is fundamental to eating for recovery and forms the foundation upon which other positive changes in eating habits are based.

Regular eating involves eating 3 meals and 2-3 snacks across the day. To maintain optimal energy, it is recommended that a person eats approximately every 3-4 hours. When you're first getting started, regular eating may take the following form:

- Breakfast
- Morning Snack
- Lunch
- Afternoon Snack
- Dinner
- Evening snack



You may be thinking, 'But I don't know anyone who eats like that!'. Well, that might be true. Many people who do not have eating disorders don't eat as frequently as is recommended. Regular eating however is an essential tool for eating disorder recovery. Even for people who don't have an eating disorder, there are significant advantages of regular eating, such as:

- Gives structure to your eating habits, so that eating can start to become a regular, normalised part of your life
- Keeps your blood sugar levels steady, which minimises tiredness, irritability, and poor concentration
- Helps to combat delayed or infrequent eating
- Helps to combat unstructured eating, such as grazing or picking
- Challenges dietary rules (e.g., 'I must not eat after 6pm' or 'I can only eat once per day'). We will cover rules in Module 7
- Establishes habits that will help prevent binge eating. When eating regularly you are less likely to become overly hungry and feel out of control of your eating

How Do I Start to Eat More Regularly?

When establishing your own system of regular eating try to follow these guidelines:

1. Plan out the timing of your meals and snacks in advance. We recommend you do this the night before each day. You can do this using your self-monitoring forms. This will help you to consider how you will incorporate 5-6 eating occasions in your day. *Note: try to avoid leaving a gap of more than 4-hours between meals/snacks as this may set you up to experience semi-starvation symptoms or binge eating.*
2. Plan what you are going to eat and where it will come from. You can also write this on your self-monitoring form.
3. As best you can, prepare your meals and snacks in advance. Try to carry snacks with you (e.g., muesli bar, dried fruit, nuts, making sure at least 2 of your snacks include carbohydrates) and organise the food you need for the day in advance. This will reduce your likelihood of skipping or getting caught out of the house without food during mealtimes.

It is essential that you **make regular eating a priority**. This may mean temporarily reshuffling your work day, when you choose to socialise, or other commitments. In the short-term, you may find it helpful to set alarm reminders to eat and **eat by the clock**, until you get into more of a routine.

At this stage, the content of your meals and snacks is less important than the regularity. You can choose what you prefer to eat. Once you have established a routine of regular eating you will be ready to make the next steps toward changing the quantity and then variety of foods that you eat. Let's start by creating a plan for increasing your structure. Take a look at the example and then plan out each day of the week in your self-monitoring form.

My Structure Plan - Example

| Time | Meal/Snack | Food/Liquid Intake |
|---------|------------|--|
| 7.00am | Breakfast | 1 cup muesli with 1 cup yoghurt 1 apple 1 coffee with hi-lo milk |
| 10.00am | Snack | 1 banana, 1 coffee with hi-lo milk |
| 12.30pm | Lunch | 1 ham, cheese and avocado sandwich 1 glass of fruit juice |
| 3.30pm | Snack | 1 muesli bar 1 tea with hi-lo milk |
| 6.00pm | Dinner | Chicken stir fry with 1 cup rice |
| 8.00pm | Snack | 1 piece of toast with spread 1 tea with hi-lo milk |

If jumping straight into a pattern of regular eating feels too overwhelming for you, you may wish to break the task down into more manageable steps. We recommend starting by including something for breakfast each day, as this will help to refuel low energy after the long fast from sleeping overnight.

Below is an example of how to break down the task of regular eating:

Week 1: Introduce breakfast daily

Week 2: Make sure I eat something for lunch and dinner consistently

Week 3: Introduce a morning and afternoon snack

Week 4: Include something small after dinner

Tip: You may find it helpful to create an alternative structure plan for your weekend. Remember, your plan can be flexible and may need to change a little during the day! That's okay, you can just adjust the guide. Writing ideas for timing and types of foods for each meal will support you to plan ahead and stay consistent with improving the regularity of your eating.



How Do I Know If I'm Eating Enough?

Once you have established regular eating, it's time to work on the quantity that you are eating. If you are experiencing ongoing symptoms of starvation, are binge eating, or have been advised that you are underweight, then you are likely not eating enough during the day. Intentionally restricting the amount or variety of foods you consume is an obvious warning sign that you are not meeting your body's energy needs.



FACT: If you are often feeling hungry or notice urges to graze on food between a meal or snack, this may be a clue that you are not eating enough. Grazing increases risk of binge-eating and will get in the way of teaching your body when it is hungry and when it is full, so try to avoid eating between your meals and snacks for now and instead work on increasing the size of your meals and snacks.

Improving the Quantity of Your Eating

Carbohydrates are one of our three main sources of energy, along with protein and fats. Starchy (also known as complex) carbohydrates are considered the most efficient source of energy because they are converted more readily into glucose (which provides energy) and release energy slowly, keeping our blood sugar levels steady. Carbohydrates are an essential fuel source for our muscles and central nervous system (including the brain). Some of our body cells (particularly the brain) prefer to run on glucose, but our body can only store it for about 24-hours, which means we need a regular supply of carbohydrates throughout the day.

When focusing on increasing the quantity of your eating, we recommend starting by increasing your consumption of carbohydrates. Complex carbohydrates should make up the majority of our food intake each day – about 50-60%. Each meal and snack you eat should contain at least one serving of carbohydrates. Complex carbohydrates include foods like breads, pasta, potato, couscous, rice and cereals.



contains a guide on recommended portion sizes of different carbohydrates. This handout also contains recommendations on adequate portion sizes of other food groups, including protein, fats, dairy, fruits and vegetables, and occasional foods. This handout should be used as rough guide only to support you to make increases to the quantity of your food intake. We do not recommend measuring or weighing food. In Module 7 we will help you identify and test out your fears of particular foods using behavioural experiments.

Carbohydrates are often feared foods. Read about carbohydrate myths and facts here 

If you are feeling overwhelmed, you can break down the task of increasing how much you are eating into smaller steps. Below is an example of how to approach the task of increasing quantities.

Week 1: Increase carbohydrates at breakfast

(e.g., add piece of toast to my meal, or bowl of cereal with milk)

Week 2: Make sure I include carbohydrates at both lunch and dinner

(e.g., sandwich with two pieces of bread at lunch, or ~1 cup of rice or pasta with dinner)

Week 3: Increase my snack servings to two items

(e.g., fruit + muesli bar, packet of chips + handful of nuts)

Week 4: Increase my servings of protein and dairy

(e.g., include toast + eggs for breakfast, incorporate yoghurt + fruit at snack time)

Now it's your turn – use the table below to create a plan of how you are going to increase the quantity of food you eat.

My Quantity Plan

| | |
|----------------|-------|
| Week 1: | _____ |
| Week 2: | _____ |
| Week 3: | _____ |
| Week 4: | _____ |

Note: There is no 'one size fits all' approach when it comes to increasing the quantity of your food intake. You may prefer to increase your intake more quickly or more slowly. The choice is yours! You will need to continue to develop plans that extend beyond 4-weeks. It can be helpful to consult a dietician for support if you are struggling.

Renourishment: What if I'm Underweight?

If you have been advised that you are underweight or are aware that you have lost a significant amount of weight with your eating disorder, then you will need **renourishment**.

Renourishment is a core goal in the early stage of eating disorder recovery. During renourishment, you will be aiming to consume significantly more energy than the eating disorder has allowed you to eat, in order to reverse the effects of starvation. When your body and brain are less starved, and you are closer to your genetic set point weight range, you can address other aspects of your eating disorder, such as fears about particular foods and body image. You **cannot remain starved and recover**. If you are underweight, you will need to gain weight.

It can be surprisingly difficult to reverse starvation during renourishment. Some people need to consume double or more than the recommended daily nutritional intake in the short-term. This means that each of your meals and snacks may need to be a lot more than what other family members, your partner, or friends are eating. You may also be instructed to reduce exercise. It may be helpful to think of **food as your medicine** which will help you get back to your natural, healthy set point. Some people will renourish with food whilst others prefer to add high-calorie supplement drinks on top of their regular meals and snacks. Whatever you choose, it is important that changes are planned and put in place consistently in order to return your body to its natural set point weight range and restore health.



Your weekly weight chart can guide you on whether the changes you have made are enough to increase your weight. This can take several weeks or months depending on the amount of weight you need to regain. You may also notice that renourishment is on track when symptoms of starvation are reducing, such as return of menstruation (if relevant to you), improved concentration and energy, not thinking about food all of the time, and many others.

Note: It is important to seek medical guidance during renourishment and consult with a dietician.

Tips for Stopping Calorie Counting

Sometimes people count calories to limit the amount they are eating and provide a sense of control. Calorie counting is a problem, as it maintains an unhealthy fixation on food, weight gain or shape change. It's also impossible to precisely calculate the calorie content of the food we eat, even with books, apps, and scales!

Tips for stopping calorie counting include:

- Stop looking at food labels
- Don't write down calories
- Redirect your attention away from doing the calorie sums in your head
- Work towards normal food habits – with regular eating, appropriate quantity and variety of foods you will learn that you don't need to rely on calorie counting to maintain a healthy diet and weight

What to Expect When You Start Making Changes

When making changes to the structure and quantity of your eating, it is normal to experience a number of physiological changes including:

- Bloating, feeling overfull, nausea. This occurs because of delayed gastric emptying and because the gut is functioning more slowly and poorly overall. These symptoms are not a reliable indicator that you have eaten too much and will be short-term only. Maintaining regular and adequate intake will alleviate these symptoms in the long-term. 
- Uneven weight distribution around the body. Initially, weight can settle around vital organs (e.g., stomach area). This is your body's way of protecting itself and will redistribute in a way your genetics prefer as your eating and weight normalizes; this can take about 6 - 12 months.
- An initial jump in weight. It is normal for the number on the scale to appear to increase significantly when you first start to change your eating. This is usually the effect of rehydration (rather than real weight change) and weight increases should slow as you eat consistently according to your plan.

My Weekly Progress Tracker

First, complete your symptom tracker:

| Eating Disorder Behaviour | Frequency (# days per week) | |
|-------------------------------------|--|-------------------|
| Restrict or dieting | | |
| Exercise (including time spent) | | |
| Binge eating | # days | # episodes |
| Vomiting to control my weight/shape | | |
| Laxative misuse | | |

Second, reflect on your self-monitoring:

What did I learn from my self-monitoring this week?

Third, review your homework from last week:

| Task | Completed? Y/N |
|--|---------------------------|
| Weekly weighing | |
| Self-monitoring daily and in real-time | |
| Completing your energy graph | |

Finally, set some goals! What do you want to work on this week?

(e.g., eat regularly, eat breakfast every day, include carbohydrates at all my main meals)

Module Summary

- When a person is eating for recovery, they will give themselves permission to eat regularly across the day, consume adequate quantities of food and allow themselves to choose from a wide variety of food groups.
- Regular eating involves eating 3 meals and 2-3 snacks across the day.
- If you are experiencing ongoing symptoms of starvation, are binge eating, or have been advised that you are underweight, then you are likely not eating enough during the day.
- When focusing on increasing the quantity of your eating, we recommend starting by increasing your consumption of carbohydrates. Carbohydrates include foods like breads, pasta, potato, couscous, rice and cereals.
- Breaking down the task of increasing the regularity and quantity of your eating into manageable steps will help you to feel less overwhelmed.
- When making changes to the structure, and quantity of your eating, it is normal to experience a number of physiological changes. These symptoms will improve with regular and sufficient eating.

Coming up...Eating For Recovery: Part 2

About the Modules

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These are some of the professional references used to create the modules in this information package.

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