



**Supporting someone with
binge eating disorder:
a guide**

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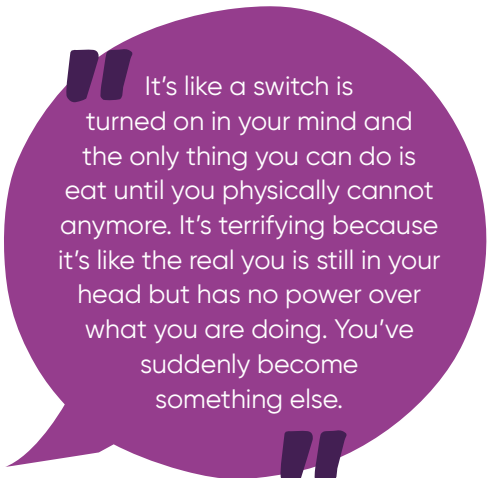
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About Beat

Beat is the UK's eating disorder charity. We exist to end the pain and suffering caused by eating disorders. Through our support services, we listen to people with eating disorders, help them to understand the illness, and support them to take positive steps towards recovery. We also support family and friends, equipping them with essential skills and advice, so they can help their loved ones recover while also looking after their own mental health.

What is binge eating disorder?

Binge eating disorder is a serious mental illness where a person tries to manage difficult thoughts, feelings, or situations by eating a very large amount of food in a short space of time, with a sense of not having any control over what they're eating. This is known as binge eating.



It's like a switch is turned on in your mind and the only thing you can do is eat until you physically cannot anymore. It's terrifying because it's like the real you is still in your head but has no power over what you are doing. You've suddenly become something else.

Binge eating has nothing to do with a large appetite, "greed" or "overindulgence". Far from the enjoyment most people would experience when having a big meal by choice, binge eating is often extremely distressing, with people feeling unable to stop even if they want to. It may involve food that the person wouldn't usually choose to eat, stolen food, or even food that is spoiled or not intended to be eaten as it is, such as frozen food. Some people feel disconnected from what they're doing during a binge, or struggle to remember what they've eaten afterwards. People with binge eating disorder often feel very negatively about themselves, with guilt and shame quickly replacing any temporary feelings of relief that binge eating may give them.

For people who don't struggle with binge eating, it can be hard to understand that it is not a choice and can't be overcome with "willpower". It is a serious illness that they'll need support and compassion to recover from.

But recovery is possible. In this booklet, you'll find information on what to look out for, how to approach someone you're concerned about, and how you can support them into and through treatment.

What causes binge eating disorder?

Binge eating disorder can affect anyone of any age, gender, ethnicity or background, although it most commonly develops in adults. Like any eating disorder, binge eating disorder is complex and has lots of possible causes.

Binge eating itself is often a way to try to cope with things the person is struggling with – this could include any kind of stress, tension, distressing event, or big change in any part of their life. Sometimes, people may process positive emotions like happiness or excitement by binge eating, too.

People who have previously had an eating disorder may be more likely to develop binge eating disorder. It's also not uncommon for someone who has another eating disorder, like anorexia or bulimia, to experience changes in their symptoms, leading to a change in diagnosis to binge eating disorder. Other mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety can mean someone is at a higher risk of developing binge eating disorder too.

“ I used binge eating as a way to manage anxiety and cope. It was the quickest thing to turn to when my mind felt like it was going to explode.



Recognising binge eating disorder

Often, people with binge eating disorder are not open about their illness because of the stigma attached to eating disorders, overeating, and the weight gain that may result from binge eating. They may also be unfamiliar with binge eating disorder themselves, and not realise that what they're experiencing is an illness. The binge eating itself is not likely to be obvious, as people often try to keep this hidden, but there are lots of other signs that someone may be struggling.

“ Low self-esteem and confidence led me to isolate more from family and friends. I could never explain how distressing bingeing was and how it occupied my mind all the time. ”

Binge eating disorder is a mental illness. While there may be some physical signs at some point, with weight gain being the most common, it could be a while before these become obvious. You will probably notice changes to the person's behaviour and mood first. These could include:

- Tension or anxiety, particularly around mealtimes. They may avoid eating around other people, or may eat very little.
- Low self-esteem and lack of confidence.
- Becoming more withdrawn – they may avoid socialising, cancel social events at short notice, or open up less about how they're feeling or what's going on in their life.
- Irritability and mood swings.
- Tiredness or difficulty sleeping.
- Buying extra food or hiding food. If you live with or often visit the person, you may find food where it isn't normally kept, food running out faster than you'd expect, or packaging from food that you didn't eat or didn't know about.

- Seeming very focused on food – this could involve talking about it a lot, concerns about calorie content, regular dieting, high interest in recipe books or cookery programmes, etc.
- Eating very quickly.
- Leaving quickly after eating or from places where food is available – regular meals or snacks can sometimes trigger binge eating, so the person may leave to continue eating privately, or to try to prevent the urge to binge eat.
- While people usually binge eat alone, there may be some ways it could be “hidden in plain sight” – for example, someone may have a reputation for eating a lot that may be treated in a light-hearted way by those around them or even the person themselves, but this is actually covering up compulsive binge eating. Someone may also eat regular meals outside binges.

You may simply have a feeling that something is wrong or that someone doesn't seem like themselves. It's always best to sensitively approach someone you're concerned about – everything may be fine, but if not, you can help them get the treatment they need and deserve.

Approaching someone you think may have binge eating disorder

People with binge eating disorder often hide their illness, and their outward reaction to someone voicing their concerns may be one of denial or anger. However, many people who have had binge eating disorder speak of the relief they felt when someone raised the issue with them, or note that they wish someone had noticed that they needed help.

I'm lucky that [my friend] was incredibly supportive, and just listened to me. She didn't suggest any diets, or even give me advice. Instead, she gave me the space I needed to talk about it in my own words. It was a relief to have finally shared it with someone else.

The most important thing to remember is to approach the person with compassion and without judgment. Even if they're not ready to talk about how they're feeling just yet, showing that you are a safe person to approach can help them to reach out when they feel able to.

Before starting a conversation:

- Decide whether you're the best person to raise this with them, or if there's someone that you feel they're more likely to open up to. While several people might have concerns, it can be unhelpful for all of you to try to speak to the person at once, as they might feel like they're being ambushed.
- Learn more about binge eating disorder – it will be easier to have a conversation if you feel informed. There's lots of information on Beat's site at beateatingdisorders.org.uk/BED
- Try to speak with the person at a time when neither of you is feeling angry or upset, in a place where you both feel comfortable and where you're unlikely to be disturbed.



During the conversation:

- Reassure them that your concern is for their wellbeing, and you're there to support them without judgement or criticism. Try not to back them into a corner or use language that could feel accusatory.
- If your relationship with them is one where you have some kind of authority, such as if you're their manager, you may also want to reassure them that they aren't in trouble.
- Give them lots of space to talk and share their own feelings – you could try using broad, open questions like "How have you been feeling recently?" or "Is there anything you're struggling with at the moment?"
- Make sure you're listening to what they're saying. It could help to voice your understanding and give them an opening to correct you if they need to. For example, you could say, "It sounds like you're feeling quite trapped – would you say that's right?"
- It can help to talk about your own concerns through "I" rather than "you" statements. "You seem very down, and you need to get support," while well-meaning, could feel aggressive and as though they're at fault for not taking steps to get support on their own. "I've noticed you seem very down, and I'd like to make sure I'm doing what I can to support you" shows that you're paying attention and care if they're okay or not, and that they don't have to manage their illness alone.
- Avoid focusing on weight and food – these may be sensitive subjects, and questions about their eating habits or suggestions, however gently made, that they should try to diet or lose weight are not helpful and may even be harmful. Eating disorders are about what the person is feeling rather than how they're treating food, so think about other things that have been worrying you – perhaps they seem isolated or have lost their confidence.

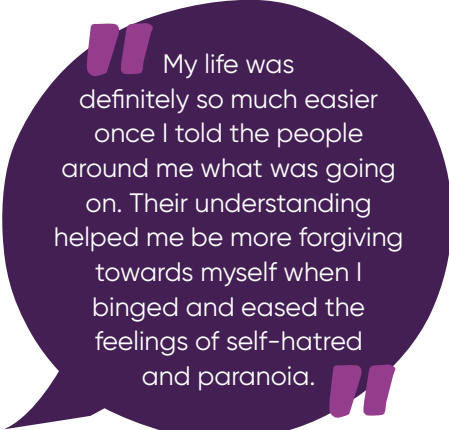
- With that said, if you feel they are opening up to you, you may want to gently and sensitively mention their eating to help move the conversation to binge eating disorder specifically. For example, if you would often eat meals together but lately they've been avoiding eating with you, saying something like "I've noticed you've been eating by yourself a lot recently – is there anything that's worrying you about eating with other people?" gives them room to share their concerns.
- If the person does talk about binge eating, your recognition of the distress this causes and of their bravery in sharing can help to show you don't judge or blame them.

After the conversation:

- Talking about struggles with mental health is very difficult. If someone has opened up to you – whether fully or not – thanking them for trusting you enough to do so can go a long way.
- If they are open to getting help, reassure them that you'll support them in seeking that. The first step is usually to make a GP appointment, and you could offer to go with them so that they don't have to manage on their own.
- You could also suggest looking at the Beat website, something they could do alone or with you. If they've got as far as talking about difficulties with their eating but not binge eating disorder specifically, this could be helpful, as they can read more about binge eating disorder and think about whether they identify with the feelings and behaviour associated with it.
- If they say they're not unwell but you are still worried, or if your concerns are met with anger or defensiveness, try not to get angry or frustrated, and don't force a conversation that you don't feel can continue productively. Make sure they know that your worry is for their wellbeing and that they can come to you if they'd like to talk about how they're feeling.
- Don't be disheartened or put off if the conversation doesn't go as you'd hoped, and, try not to wait too long before raising the subject again. Think about whether there's anything you can learn from the conversation. Was there anything specific that the person found upsetting? Could you approach it differently?

If someone has told you they have binge eating disorder

You may be reading this booklet because someone has told you that they're worried about themselves. Telling you about this may have been very difficult for the person, but the fact that they did is a really good sign that they would like to get better, and are looking for your support to help them do that.



My life was definitely so much easier once I told the people around me what was going on. Their understanding helped me be more forgiving towards myself when I binged and eased the feelings of self-hatred and paranoia.

- Be careful not to downplay the seriousness of what they're telling you. Things that you might intend to be reassuring, such as suggesting that it probably isn't anything to worry about or comparing it to "comfort eating" can feel dismissive. It may also have taken a long time for people with eating disorders themselves to recognise there's something wrong. Calmly but seriously recognising their concerns is likely to give more reassurance that they've taken a positive step in seeking your support, and increase their confidence that they can get the help they need.
- Remember that at its root, binge eating disorder is not about what someone is doing with food, but why they are feeling compelled to binge eat in the first place. You may have questions about the person's illness, but try to focus on allowing the person to talk about how they're feeling, rather than making them feel pushed into sharing their eating habits.

- If you're concerned your first reaction wasn't as helpful as it could have been, reach out to show your support as quickly as possible. Reassure them that you know binge eating disorder is a serious illness that they did not choose, and that you'd like to understand more about it and support them in getting the help they need. It may help to read more about binge eating disorder either alone or with them at beateatingdisorders.org.uk/BED
- Binge eating disorder is a very secretive illness, and sometimes even those closest to a person won't realise there's something wrong. If you hadn't suspected the person was ill, try not to blame yourself – this isn't what the person you're supporting needs. The best thing you can do now is take their concerns seriously and ask what you can do to help them get better.
- Hearing that someone you know has a serious illness can be a lot to process, and we'd encourage you to get in touch with the Beat Helpline if you'd like support or further guidance on what to do next.



Seeking help

As serious as binge eating disorder is, the right treatment, given at the earliest opportunity, helps people address what's causing their binge eating and find healthy ways to manage difficult emotions or situations. As someone goes through treatment, having supportive people around them will be important to their recovery.

I think I'd have benefitted from talking to a GP when I was at my worst, but it never really occurred to me to go. I didn't take my illness seriously until I was already in recovery.

The first step to getting treatment is usually making an appointment with a general practitioner (GP). Ideally, the GP will make a referral to an eating disorders specialist, who has the expertise to assess whether the person has binge eating disorder and what kind of treatment they should have.

If the person isn't registered with a GP, you could help them to look up surgeries in their local area and find a suitable one. They may want to book a double appointment so that they have plenty of time to talk about what they're experiencing.

Talking to a healthcare professional about what they're going through might feel very difficult for someone with binge eating disorder. There are things you can do to support them through this.

- Speak with them beforehand about what they'd like to share with the GP. It may help to write down their concerns, and you and others around them may want to add things that you've observed as well.
- Ask them if they'd like you to attend the appointment with them, and what role they'd like you to take. Just your presence might help them feel more confident. There might be specific points they'd like help making, or they may appreciate it if you'd do the majority of the talking.

- Beat offers a leaflet for people who are concerned they have binge eating disorder to take to the GP with them, which contains a guide on binge eating disorder for the GP. Make sure that this guide is given to the GP at the beginning of the appointment.

Unfortunately, we know that some people who have been to the GP about binge eating disorder have found their GP has focused on their weight. **Taking deliberate steps to lose weight is not part of any recommended treatment for binge eating disorder.** In fact, attempting to lose weight during treatment, for example by dieting, can trigger binge eating and force someone further into the illness.

At the same time, no one should be denied treatment for binge eating disorder if they haven't experienced significant weight gain – not everyone does, and this is not a sign that they're less seriously ill.

Good treatment should not focus on weight, but address the psychological causes of binge eating. This is covered in the GP guide, so direct their attention to it, and if they're not offering the referral that the person needs, remember that they can speak to a different GP. You could also look into whether self-referral to the eating disorders service in your area is possible.

Sometimes, it may be appropriate to challenge or make a complaint about the decisions being made about treatment. You can learn more about this at beateatingdisorders.org.uk/support-services/overturning-bad-decisions

Recommended treatments

The treatments below are based on the guideline on treating eating disorders from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE). NICE uses the best available evidence to outline the treatments that work most reliably for people with binge eating disorder. While not legally bound to follow them, healthcare professionals should take the guidelines into account while treating a patient.

Most treatment for binge eating disorder is delivered as outpatient treatment, meaning that the person will visit the treatment facility for treatment sessions, but otherwise is likely to continue with their day-to-day life. Day patient treatment, where someone would spend the whole day at the treatment facility, or inpatient treatment, where someone is under 24-hour care, is usually necessary for binge eating disorder only when the person is at risk of suicide or severe self-harm.

The recommended treatments for binge eating disorder are mainly based on cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), which aims to help the patient deal positively with the thoughts and feelings that cause the illness by breaking problems down into smaller parts. It shows them how to change negative patterns to improve the way they feel.



- NICE recommends guided self-help, focused specifically on binge eating disorder, as the first step. This should use self-help materials based on CBT, and should involve supportive sessions over the course of the programme to help ensure its effectiveness.
- If guided self-help isn't appropriate for the person, NICE recommends group CBT focused on eating disorders.
- If group CBT isn't available, or the patient doesn't feel that it suits them, NICE recommends individual CBT focused on eating disorders.

NICE advises trying guided self-help for four weeks before seeing if something else will work better. It can be frustrating to not see results immediately. Encourage the person you're supporting not to give up, but at the same time, remind them that they are entitled to ask to change treatment plan if their current one isn't working. And while the treatments above are those that are most often recommended, no two people are alike, and a treatment that isn't mentioned by NICE could be more appropriate in this particular instance. You could help the person to consider what isn't working and what they would like from treatment so that they can have a conversation with their treatment team about what might work better for them.

Supporting someone with binge eating disorder

Binge eating disorder can affect anyone. You may be reading this leaflet to learn about how to support a family member, a friend, a partner, a colleague; they could be any age; you may live with them or not. No matter your relationship with the person, your support can help them to focus on getting better and make it easier to manage the things in their life that could trigger binge eating.

In the following pages are some ideas for how you could provide support, in specific situations as well as more generally.

“ People need comfort, support, love and a big hug – not a diet book. ”



General support

- Support can be practical or emotional, and you may be able to offer either or both. Perhaps the best thing you could do is give them a space to talk about how they're feeling; perhaps they'd like help with decluttering their living space. If in doubt, ask, as there may be ways to make things easier that you haven't considered. And keep checking in as their needs might change.
- At the same time, it's important to be aware of, and to make clear, your own boundaries – if there are things that you aren't comfortable with, or aren't able to do, don't push yourself. The support you give shouldn't be at the expense of your own mental or physical health.
- People may worry about "burdening" others, so it might be useful to propose a regular time to check in with them, with the understanding that you don't expect them to share if they don't want to.
- Even if their binge eating disorder causes them to withdraw, keep inviting them to join in with social activities. It may help to do things that don't revolve around food – you can discuss with them what they feel comfortable with.
- Take time to discuss topics outside of the illness and treatment – it's good to give them space to talk about what they're going through, but they (and you) may want breaks from it, too.
- Binge eating disorder can really impact someone's self-esteem, Please replace with "and encouragement and positivity both about their progress in recovery and things they're doing outside treatment can be helpful. Avoid focusing this on their appearance.
- For times when they are at risk of binge eating, some people find it helpful to have ways to distract themselves. You could talk about what they would find useful, as this could include things that you could do with them, like a board game or taking a gentle walk. If they are comfortable with it, you could also learn more about what times or circumstances they find especially triggering, so that you're better able to offer the distraction they need when they need it.

Support with eating

It could help to have an open conversation about what support around food is most useful. Below are some possible starting points.

- Some people may have difficulty with the amount of food in supermarkets. Writing a list and shopping together may make things easier. Food shopping via the internet can also be helpful for some people.
- Having certain foods in the house could be particularly hard, and you may want to discuss limiting potential binge foods, e.g. buying single servings of snacks rather than multipacks, or making food in smaller batches. This may not be the right approach for everyone, so let them lead the conversation about whether this is appropriate.
- Often people with binge eating disorder feel self-conscious while eating in front of others. Keeping conversation light and focused away from food or the eating disorder, or even having a distraction like putting a film on can help. Some people may appreciate occasional check-ins throughout a meal.
- For some, food-related gifts, or events like weddings or cultural celebrations that involve lots of food, might be uncomfortable or triggering. It could be helpful to have a discussion about whether the person is happy to be gifted food items, and how they'd like to be involved in such events.

Supporting a partner

- If you have children, try to involve them if possible – while you may wish to shield them, they may realise something is wrong. Explain the situation in age-appropriate terms, reassure them, and encourage them to ask questions. If they're old enough, you could show them our leaflet "Caring for Someone with an Eating Disorder (for under 18s)", available on our site.
- Remember binge eating disorder is an isolating and secretive by nature. It can cause low self-esteem and seriously impact someone's body image. Your partner may not want to be physically or emotionally intimate while they're ill. This is not them rejecting you, but the eating disorder speaking.
- Try to keep doing things together as a couple and as a family.
- You may, as well as supporting your partner, be taking on things they would normally do, so remember to consider your own boundaries and self-care too, and think about what external support you could get.

Supporting a colleague

Issues at work can sometimes contribute to binge eating disorder, and the illness can cause people to struggle at work, but there is a lot of support that you can offer if someone you work with has binge eating disorder.

- You may be concerned about someone, but not work with them directly. It may be more appropriate to share your concerns with their manager.
- If someone has disclosed to you that they have binge eating disorder, you can learn more at beateatingdisorders.org.uk/BED. Your compassion, understanding and sensitivity as they navigate this serious illness will be extremely appreciated, and one of the best things you can do to help them recover.
- Making reasonable adjustments for the person, such as enabling them to work more flexible hours or changing shift times so that they can more easily attend appointments, can hugely help them in their recovery. Speak with them about what they might need.
- Discuss whether there are parts of their work that might be especially difficult at the moment, and if there are things that could be made less of a priority or covered by someone else while they are recovering.
- If you don't make direct decisions about their work, you could still take on some of their workload if you have capacity and they'd find this helpful.
- Try to encourage a healthy culture around food in the workplace, avoiding things like diet talk, pressure to eat communal food, or workplace "weight loss challenges".

Supporting a student

If you are supporting someone who is currently studying, there are ways to help reduce academic stress.

- Make sure they are clear on their options for getting academic and pastoral support, or taking a break from their studies if necessary. If you can't help directly, you could help them find the person who can.
- Be aware that they may need to take time out to attend appointments or to look after their mental health – your understanding and accommodation of this is a very helpful way to support them.
- Ask them what you can do to support them – if pressure from their studies is contributing to their binge eating disorder, then depending on your relationship to them, it could help to share notes, study with them, or talk about a piece of work they're struggling with.

Managing difficult situations

Binge eating disorder can make people behave in ways that seem out of character – this is not them but the eating disorder speaking. If you find yourself in conflict with the person you're supporting:

- Try not to get angry. It may be best to walk away and talk once things are calmer.
- If you do get frustrated, explain your emotions once things have calmed down, and encourage the person to do the same. Clear communication can help you avoid future tense situations.
- Though the person you're supporting is ill, you have the right to set boundaries. If their behaviour crosses a line, be clear when things are calm about where your boundaries lie.
- Conflicting approaches when emotions are running high may make things worse, so if there are other people involved, talk with them about how best to defuse difficult situations.

Supporting someone in recovery

With the right treatment and support, full recovery from binge eating disorder is possible. But there is a risk of people slipping back into harmful behaviours, or even relapsing into their eating disorder. In fact, it's common during the process of recovery to experience setbacks from time to time.

“ I now know how to reason with myself when I do eat a little more than I usually would and to qualify what is and isn't a binge. I've taught myself forgiveness and always believe that tomorrow is a new day. ”

As disheartening as this might be for both them and you, try to remember it is not a sign that the person can't recover, isn't working hard enough at recovery, or is back at the beginning. Remember not to blame them if their recovery isn't as straightforward as you and they might hope. Instead, encourage them to see setbacks as things to learn from that can ultimately strengthen their recovery. It could be helpful to make a plan for what to do if they feel they are beginning to struggle. This could cover things like:

- The thoughts and feelings they know may signal they need support.
- Signs that those around them can be on the lookout for.
- Things that they find helpful or distracting if they are struggling with the urge to binge eat.
- Who they can speak to and where they can go to get support.

If someone does feel fully recovered, remember to stay open, supportive, and aware of things they might be having difficulty with. If you can create a safe and non-judgmental space for them, they'll feel much more able to approach you if they're struggling again.

Support for yourself

Depending on your relationship to the person, the eating disorder may significantly impact you too. Having your own support network and things that you can do to look after your own wellbeing is important.

There are a number of support services and resources for those caring for someone with binge eating disorder. You can see these in the Resources section.

Telling others

Think about what you might need and who might be able to help you. This doesn't need to be direct help with supporting the person with binge eating disorder – if there are people who want to help but whose close involvement is not appropriate, you could ask for help with day-to-day tasks.

You may not need to explain the exact nature of the illness to people, but if you do need to talk about the eating disorder, the information in this booklet or on our website may help them understand more about eating disorders.

You might find people have questions about your wellbeing and that of the person with the eating disorder. You could ask someone else to keep people updated if this becomes difficult for you. If you're receiving unwanted questions or offers of help in dealing with the eating disorder, explain that what you need from them is their understanding and their continued friendship and support.

Resources

We hope that you've found this booklet helpful, but we know that you'll have a lot more questions and may need other resources. Here are some that you or the person you're supporting might find helpful:

Beat

- Our Helpline is available to anyone affected by an eating disorder, including those supporting someone. We're open 9am – 8pm weekdays and 4pm – 8pm weekends and bank holidays on 0808 801 0677. This is free and confidential.
- Our online peer support group for anyone supporting someone with an eating disorder, the Aviary, is open 6.45pm – 8pm on Sundays. These moderated chats are free and anonymous, allowing you to get peer support from others who have similar experiences to you. You can attend as often as you'd like, with no pressure to attend every time.
- You could also direct the person you're supporting to Nightingale, for anyone struggling with binge eating disorder, which runs 6.45pm – 8pm on Tuesdays and Friday.
- helpfinder.beat.org.uk is a database allowing you to search for local support services.
- In select areas, we offer a free peer coaching service, Echo, for anyone supporting someone with an eating disorder. You'll be paired up with someone else who's previously cared for someone with an eating disorder. Through weekly 30-minute phone calls, they'll give you a space where you feel understood, while empowering you to support someone into recovery. Sign up or register interest to be told when Echo is available to people in your area at beateatingdisorders.org.uk/echo

British Association for Counsellors and Psychotherapists

Search for therapists working locally. Visit bacp.co.uk

Carers Direct

An NHS service for carers. Visit nhs.uk/carersdirect or call their helpline on 0300 123 1053

Carers Trust

A charity offering support to carers. Visit carers.org

Childline

A charity offering support to children and young people, including young carers. Visit childline.org.uk or call their helpline on 0800 1111

Citizens Advice Bureau

For enquiries about legal rights and responsibilities, benefits for carers, and financial advice. Visit citizensadvice.org.uk

GOV.UK

Contains information about support services, both your rights and those of the person you're supporting, and more on the laws that may be relevant to you. Visit gov.uk

Mind

Information and support for anyone affected by mental health issues. Visit mind.org.uk or call 0300 123 3393.

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence

The NICE guidelines on the treatment the person you're caring for is entitled to. Visit [nice.org.uk](https://www.nice.org.uk)

NHS Choices

Information on eating disorders and other mental and physical health issues, different treatment options, and local services. Visit [nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk)

Overcoming Binge Eating

The book *Overcoming Binge Eating, Second Edition: The Proven Program to Learn Why You Binge and How You Can Stop* by Christopher Fairburn presents information about eating disorders followed by an evidence-based self-help programme for overcoming binge eating problems.

Rethink

Information and support for anyone affected by mental health issues. Visit [rethink.org](https://www.rethink.org) or call 0808 801 0525

Samaritans

A 24-hour listening service for anyone in emotional distress, offering a confidential and non-judgmental space to share. They also have information on supporting someone you're worried about. Visit [samaritans.org](https://www.samaritans.org) or call 116 123



 @beatED

 beat.eating.disorders

 beatedsupport

General enquiries

Unit 1 Chalk Hill House, 19 Rosary Road,
Norwich, NR1 1SZ

0300 123 3355

beateatingdisorders.org.uk

info@beateatingdisorders.org.uk

Last reviewed: February 2021

A charity registered in England and Wales (801343)
and Scotland (SC039309).

Company limited by guarantee no 2368495