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Overcoming Disordered Eating

Information Pack A

Take Charge ... Initiate Change

Module 5

Regular Eating & Regular Weighing

Introduction	2
Regular Eating	2
How to Eat Regularly	3
My Daily Meal Plan	5
Weighing and Weight	5
My Weight Chart (Example)	7
My Weight Chart	8
Module Summary	9
About This Module	10

This is the fifth module of Information Pack A, which provides information about disordered eating and offers strategies to help you start changing the *behaviours* associated with your disordered eating and weight control habits. We suggest you read through all the modules of this Information Pack, in order, before embarking on change.

If you do think you might suffer from an eating disorder, it is important that you talk to your General Practitioner, as there are many physical complications that can arise from being at an unhealthily low weight or from losing weight very quickly, or from purging. We advise you to seek professional help with working on an eating disorder.

If you use any extreme weight control behaviours – even rarely – you should also see your General Practitioner for a full medical check-up, as your health might be compromised. Such extreme measures include:

- extreme food restriction/fasting (and/or rapid weight loss)
- purging (self-induced vomiting, misuse of laxatives or diuretics)
- extreme exercise



Introduction

In the last module we introduced self-monitoring. In this module we will encourage you continue your involvement in ‘Action’ mode. You will learn another step in breaking the vicious cycle of your disordered eating by initiating regular eating and regular weighing, which will become important parts of improving your eating habits.

Regular Eating

Regular eating is an important component of healthy eating habits. It makes sense to follow a regular eating plan, but it can be confusing, when we have so much conflicting advice about when to eat.

What is Regular Eating?

Regular eating involves eating something roughly every three hours. Regular eating usually takes the form of three meals and 2 or 3 snacks a day. This usually involves:

- Breakfast
- A snack for morning tea
- Lunch
- A snack in the afternoon
- Dinner
- A snack after dinner if required (e.g., if you’ve had an early dinner)



Why is Regular Eating Important?

Establishing regular eating habits forms a fundamental part of overcoming disordered eating. Regular eating is the foundation upon which other positive changes in eating habits are based.

The aim of regular eating is to establish a positive eating habit that can be built upon as you progress through the modules of this information package – and throughout your life. The first step is to get used to eating regularly. Many people have got used to skipping meals, so eating every 3 – 4 hours might seem hard at first. Regular eating provides a structure and once it becomes part of your routine, it will require little energy or conscious thought to keep it in place. When it becomes a habit, the content of your meals and snacks can be adjusted as required. Eating regularly will also improve concentration, keep your blood sugar levels stable and minimise feelings of tiredness, dizziness and irritability.

Regular eating establishes habits that combat delayed or infrequent eating and unstructured eating, such as grazing. When you are eating regularly, you avoid the extreme hunger that can lead to binge eating. In Module 3 we saw how one set of dietary rules relates to when we allow ourselves to eat. You may currently be following a dietary rule about “when” to eat. Some people follow a rule of not eating before dinner time. Others follow a rule of only eating once a day. However, as we discussed in Module 3, irregular eating leads to hunger. When your body becomes hungry and your mind becomes preoccupied with food, it is likely that you will overeat or binge. In this way, strict dietary rules lead to binge eating (and often purging) and keep eating disorders going. To break the cycle of your disordered eating, it is important to stop these behaviours. Regular eating will help you change your dietary rules about **when** to eat and replace them with a healthy regimen. This will help you remove the influence of dietary restriction and hunger on your eating habits, and help you resolve your disordered eating. It may also help you feel more in control. Furthermore, if you leave more than 5 hours between eating (during the day), your body goes



into “Starvation Mode”, expecting a further lack of food. It lowers its metabolic rate in order to preserve energy. Therefore, when you do eat next, the food will be metabolised differently, for the purpose of storage – exactly what you are trying to avoid!

Do you have any dietary rules about when to eat? If so, how do they affect your life? If your rules about when to eat involve eating irregularly or skipping meals, do you find yourself getting hungry? Does this lead to binge eating? If so, consider how regular eating may be helpful, and write your thoughts below.

How to Eat Regularly

At this stage, the content of your meals and snacks is not of primary importance. What is crucial is that you start the habit of eating regularly. To make progress, we ask you to begin regular eating once you have obtained a few days’ records (from your food logs) of baseline eating.

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

- **Make regular eating a priority.** It needs to become an important part of your day and may need, in the short term, to take precedence over other activities.
- **Plan your meals or snacks.** Know when your next meal or snack will be, and where it will come from. Carrying a snack with you can help if you get caught away from the house/office. Think up a list of possible snacks that you can have with you in your car or in your bag (e.g., an apple, a muesli bar).
- **Eat whatever you would like for your meals or snacks.** At the beginning, the content of your meals or snacks is not important. Establishing regular eating will make it easier for you to modify the content of meals and snacks later, as you work through this information package.
- **You may choose what to eat, but you must try hard not to purge** (i.e., vomit or use laxatives).
- **Do not skip a meal or snack.** Being busy at home or work, or being out, is not an excuse for missing a meal or snack. Regular eating must be a priority.
- **Do not leave a gap of more than 4 hours between meals/snacks.** If you have trouble remembering to eat regularly, you may find it useful to set a personal alarm to signal meal/ snack time.
- **Do not eat between meals or snacks.** Eating between meals or snacks is known as grazing. Grazing is an unhelpful eating habit which prevents you from developing structure in your eating habits. If you have the urge to graze, try to resist it. You may find the idea of “surfing” this urge a useful concept. When you feel the urge to eat between meals or snacks, you also may find it useful to distract yourself with other tasks. Do your best to delay eating by 15 minutes. Remember that such urges pass with time, and if you are conscious of such urges you can overcome them. If you consistently experience hunger between meals and snacks you may want to reconsider how you schedule your eating – everybody is different. Maybe 3-4 hours is just too long for your body to go without food! Or maybe you’re not eating enough to sustain you, and you need to have slightly larger meals/snacks.
- **Do not give up.** Initially, you may find it difficult to stick to regular eating. If this is the case don’t worry or give up; regular eating becomes easier with practice.



You may be worried that regular eating will lead to weight gain, but people who are not underweight do not usually gain weight with regular eating. Remember you are less likely to binge if you eat regularly – and it is this binge eating that puts on weight, even if you purge. (We will discuss this more in Module 6.)





Developing a Regular Eating plan

The guidelines above will help you develop a system of regular eating. However, you need to devise a plan to make regular eating work in your own personal circumstances. Consider how you will work around obstacles to regular eating. For example, if you will be away from the home or office at mealtime, what will you do? If you are afraid of eating often, how will you manage this fear? Write your thoughts below.

We suggest that you divide your day up and plan the times when you are going to have a meal or a snack. Imagine, for example, Marie, someone who normally wakes up and has coffee and breakfast at around 7 a.m., and who has her evening meal at around 6 p.m. That is 11 hours, so a half-way point (5.5 hours) would be a good time to plan lunch – that is, 12.30 p.m. Half-way between breakfast and lunch is approximately 10 am, so that's when Marie should have her morning tea. Half-way between lunch and her evening meal is 3-3.30 p.m., so that's when she should plan afternoon tea. And because she has an early evening meal, she may consider another snack at around 8 p.m.

See what such a schedule might look like:

Example - Marie

Meal/Snack		Time	Meal plan
Breakfast	Time Marie gets up	7 am	1 cup muesli, 1/2 yoghurt, 1 apple 1 coffee with Hi-Lo milk
Mid-morning snack		10	1 banana, 1 coffee with Hi-Lo milk
Lunch	Half-way between breakfast and evening meal	12.30	1 ham & cheese & avocado sandwich 1 glass fruit juice, 1 small banana
Afternoon snack		3.30	1 muesli bar 1 tea with Hi-Lo milk
Evening meal	Time Marie usually eats supper	6	Chicken stir-fry with 1 cup rice
Evening snack (optional)		8	1 piece toast with Vegemite 1 cup tea with Hi-lo milk

Don't be too rigid - these are not hard-and-fast rules, merely guidelines. For example, if Marie knew she was going to be in a lecture till 4, she might wait until then to have her afternoon snack. However, if her class ran from 2-5, she may need to take a snack in her bag and make sure she took a break, eating it some time between 3 and 3.30.

Now let's see how you might plan your eating during the day. Fill in the schedule overleaf for tomorrow:



My Daily Meal plan

Meal/snack		Time	Meal plan
Breakfast			
Mid-morning snack			
Lunch	Half-way between breakfast and evening meal		
Snack with afternoon tea			
Evening meal	Time I usually eat supper		
Evening snack (optional)			

Weight and Weighing

Weight

It is important to bear in mind that *the goal of this information package is not for you to lose weight*, and that *the goal of weight loss is incompatible with correcting disturbed eating*. Remember what we said in Module 1 about holding off on any plans to lose weight, while you focus on improving from your disordered eating? This is a timely reminder of that.

Nevertheless, we know that you will still be concerned about your weight. You may be worried that eating regularly might mean eating more than you've been used to, which could lead to weight gain. We would like to remind you that most people in the healthy weight range who adopt regular eating end up within 1 kg. of where they started, and some even lose weight. This is because even if you consume more calories than usual from healthy food choices, you're less likely to binge eat and therefore you'll be ingesting fewer calories. This means you're not actually eating more, you may be eating less, with fewer calories overall! Remember, more healthy food → smaller and/or fewer binges.

So why not go for following a healthy meal plan and regular eating? Give it a try!

Weighing Yourself

Most people with disordered eating are concerned about their weight and weigh themselves frequently, often several times a day. Do you weigh yourself often? This is very unhelpful, as it can give you misleading information. Frequent weighing will limit your progress because it leads to preoccupation with weight and with the number on the scale.



Everyone's weight fluctuates throughout the day, by up to 2-3 kg. Weight depends upon many factors, including: when you have eaten and drunk, your body hydration, the stage in your menstrual cycle (if you are female), and bowel/bladder functions – even the temperature and humidity outside! So there is no such thing as your "true weight", only a measure of your weight at one particular moment. If you weigh yourself too often, these normal fluctuations may lead you to misinterpret your weight – and then restrict your food.



Remember that you can't interpret any one single reading on the scale. Clinicians generally look for weight trends, which we get from looking over the previous four readings. Don't get hung up on a number. We encourage you to think of a weight range in which your body and eating patterns would be healthy. (This weight range should include a variation of up to 3 kg, such as "between 66 and 69 kg.") If you look at the example overleaf, you will see that the woman's weight at Week 7 is 3 kg above her starting weight, but it doesn't stay that high.

We suggest that you weigh yourself once a week, at the same time, on the same scales, wearing similar clothing (or none) each time. Why do we suggest that you weigh yourself? Knowing your weight each week is central to your progress because:

- Your eating habits will be changing, and it is important that you have an accurate understanding of how these changing eating habits affect (or don't affect) your weight. It's a reality check.
- It will allow you to track your progress towards your target weight range.
- Avoidance of your weight will not help your treatment.



Measuring your weight weekly, examining your weight changes, and identifying weight patterns over a number of weeks will help you to focus on long-term and accurate trends. It is important that you do not weigh yourself more than once a week. You may find it easier to stick to this rule if you give your scales to someone for safe-keeping.

Does what we have just told you about weight fluctuations make sense? What seems like a healthy weight range for you? Does frequent weighing make you miserable? If this is the case, consider how just weighing once a week may benefit you. Take a moment to think about weighing yourself, and how you will manage with only weighing once a week. Write your thoughts below.

Overleaf you will find a weight chart. We suggest that you start by calculating your BMI and your healthy weight range, using the formula in Module 1. Look at the example below to help you understand how to complete your weight chart.

1. The left hand column is for weight. Write your current weight about half-way down, where the asterisk (*) is.
2. Starting from your current weight, fill in the weight column, working up by 1 kg per line, and then down.
3. Calculate your BMI and enter it in the first box next to your weight
4. Calculate the top and the bottom of your healthy weight range, and enter the figures "25" and "20" next to the weight that corresponds to those top and bottom figures.
5. Each week, mark your current weight. Don't get hung up on a number. Look for trends over the past 4 weeks.



My Weight Chart

(Example)

Here is the example from Module 1: a woman who is 1.70m tall and weighs 67kg, and whose healthy weight range is 58 – 72 kg. Her current BMI is 23.18. We have also added in her weight over the following 20 weeks.

Wt (kg)	BMI																			
72	25																			
71																				
70					x															
69						x				x	x									
68		x	x	x	x			x			x									
* 67	X 23.18		x				x				x				x	x				
66												x	x	x			x			
65																				
64																				
63																				
62																				
61																				
60																				
59																				
58	20																			
Week	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20

Overleaf you will find a blank Weight Chart. Enter your current weight and BMI data:



My Weight Chart



Module Summary

- Regular eating will require you to eat something approximately every 3 hours.
- Regular eating will help give structure to your eating habits.
- Regular eating is designed to break your dietary rules about when to eat. Eating irregularly leads to hunger and preoccupation with food, which subsequently encourages binge eating.
- Weekly weighing is recommended, in order to track trends in weight. It is important to weigh yourself only once a week.
- Frequent weighing is unhelpful as it leads to preoccupation with weight and gives information that is easily misleading. Weight fluctuates throughout the day and is influenced by many factors.
- Weight may, understandably, be a concern to you, but you need to remember that having a goal of weight loss is incompatible with recovering from an eating disorder, and you need to suspend any thoughts of losing weight while working through these modules. Most people in the healthy weight range who follow this kind of programme do not gain weight, and some lose weight once they stop binge eating.
- A weight chart can help keep track of your weight and give you feedback on trends over time.

What I Have Learned in this Module

Think about what you have learned in this module and any useful bits of information, tips or strategies that you want to remember. Write them down below so you can refer to them later.

Think about how you might use the information you have just learned. Write down some ways in which you could make use of this information.

Coming Up...

In Module 6 (Binge Eating, Purging & Driven Exercise) we will begin to tackle some of the core symptoms of your disordered eating.





About This Module

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BACKGROUND AND REFERENCES

The concepts and strategies in this module have been developed from evidence-based psychological treatment of eating disorders, primarily Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT). This can be found in the following:

- Fairburn, C. G. (1995) *Overcoming Binge Eating*. New York: The Guilford Press
- Fairburn, C. G., Cooper, Z., & Shafran, R. (2003) Cognitive behaviour therapy for eating disorders: a “transdiagnostic” theory and treatment. *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 41, pp 509-528

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