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# **Overcoming Disordered Eating**

## **Information Pack A**

### ***Take Charge ... Initiate Change***

#### **Module 9**

## **Addressing Dietary Rules**

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This is the ninth 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 unhealthy 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 looked at strict dietary rules, dietary restriction and dietary restraint. In this module we will look at ways of overcome these strict dietary behaviours. We will address one of the key barriers to overcoming dietary rules: fear of weight gain. We will analyse any binges you may still be having, and introduce a problem-solving strategy that you can apply to all kinds of problems in your life.

## **Overcoming Strict Dietary Rules**

As we have outlined in the last module, engaging in dietary restraint and dietary restriction isn't a solution, it is a problem. You will never conquer binge eating and purging until you stop limiting your food intake.

### **Overcoming Food Avoidance**

It is likely that you feel uncomfortable eating certain foods because you're afraid they will make you gain weight, or you might lose control whilst eating them. You may have developed strict rules about not eating these foods and try to avoid them. The first step in overcoming strict dietary rules is to *stop avoiding* certain foods. This is addressing Dietary Rule 2 (*what to eat*), that usually involves a list of "forbidden" or "bad" foods.

We have noted that strict dietary rules tend to get broken, and this can be upsetting and reactivate the eating disorder cycles you've been working so hard to break. For this reason, it is important that you overcome your fear of these foods and practice eating them as part of your normal life. As we said in the last module, some foods (like fruit and vegetables, meat/fish/tofu, bread/rice/potatoes/pasta and oils) you need to be able to eat everyday, while others, like chocolate and ice-cream, can be thought of as 'occasional foods'. *It is physically impossible to put on weight by eating one normal size serving of any food.* You need to challenge your worries about eating these foods, as these worries are part of the unhelpful thinking patterns, or mindsets, related to eating disorders. (We will discuss Mindsets further in Information Pack B.) Remember, *we are not saying that you will have to eat lots of these foods every day.* We just want you to be able to eat them from time to time without fear, and to rid yourself of the eating disorder mindset that forbids you to eat them.

Let's begin with the Supermarket Exercise. We call exercises such as these 'behavioural experiments', because you are experimenting with new behaviours, like a scientist conducting an experiment. This one is a little like a fact-finding mission. You will need to go to the supermarket, taking a pen and small notebook.



1. In the supermarket...as you walk along the aisles, imagine yourself eating the foods on the shelves. Ask yourself if you are scared to eat them. List everything that you consider a "forbidden" food.
2. When you get home...take your list and rate your level of fear (on a 1-10 scale) if you had to eat one serving of that food. Then do the experiment overleaf.

<b>1. Avoided foods</b>	<b>2. Fear level</b>	<b>1. Avoided foods</b>	<b>2. Fear level</b>
1		11	
2		12	
3		13	
4		14	
5		15	
6		16	
7		17	
8		18	
9		19	
10		20	

## **Overcoming Food Avoidance**



1. Take your list of the supermarket foods and categorise them into 3 columns according to the level of fear you would experience if you were asked to eat that particular piece of food. You may wish to add foods that you didn't see at the supermarket.

<b>Foods I avoid a little (1-4)</b>	<b>Fear level</b>	<b>Foods I avoid a lot (5-7)</b>	<b>Fear level</b>	<b>Foods I avoid totally (8-10)</b>	<b>Fear level</b>
<i>E.g. Avocado (in salad)</i>	4	<i>E.g. Peanut butter (on toast)</i>	7	<i>E.g. Chocolate</i>	10

We are now suggesting that you gradually begin eating some of the foods that you've been avoiding.

2. Begin with your easier foods - those in Column A. Choose a food from this column that you rated approximately 3 or 4 out of 10. Think critically about your fears of this food. Will anything happen to you after you eat the food?

Chosen food: \_\_\_\_\_ Rating \_\_\_\_\_ /10 at the start of the experiment

3. Plan to eat your selected food in the next week. You may want to introduce the food on a day that you feel more confident. Eat it in place of or as part of a normal meal or snack (e.g. ½ avocado sliced in salad). Don't worry if you only try it once! Note your reactions to eating the food in your food logs.

When: \_\_\_\_\_ Where: \_\_\_\_\_ With whom will you eat this food? \_\_\_\_\_

What do you need to buy/prepare first? \_\_\_\_\_ How much will you eat? \_\_\_\_\_

4. Practice this behaviour. Try eating this same food a few times until the fear level (rating out of 10) comes down.

5. You are now ready to move onto other foods on your list – remember that the key is to break things down into steps. So if one regular sized chocolate bar is 10 out of 10 you may need to start by eating a fun-size bar or a Freddo frog and then work up to the regular bar. Chocolate is an 'occasional food' so it may take several weeks before you've worked through this fear. You don't have to eat chocolate all the time – you just need to be able to cope with eating some from time to time without your eating disorder mindset getting reactivated.



This process will take time. In the beginning it may well cause anxiety and distress. However, the more you practice this task, the easier it will become. You need to start facing your fears in order to overcome them. You may want to tackle only the foods in Column A for now, and come back later to tackle foods in Columns B and C.



Take a moment to think about how you will introduce different “forbidden” foods into your own life. Consider what might get in the way of succeeding with this exercise, and what you will need to do to succeed in eating the foods that you have been avoiding. Please write your thoughts below.

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### **Overcoming Other forms of Dietary Rules**

We can address other forms of dietary rules in a similar way, as behavioural experiments. (How to do behavioural experiments is explained in Module 4 of Information Pack B.) You may want to challenge some other rules by testing out your predictions (or fears) of what would happen. Other rules may include: keeping to a low daily calorie intake, not eating in front of people, and not eating in restaurants because you don’t know what’s gone into the dish. Look at your rules from the last module, and decide which you would like to challenge first. Take one at a time and be systematic. Write down the dietary rule that you will challenge first.

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### **Guidelines not Rules**

If you wish to cease dietary restraint, it is crucial to cease all dietary rules. Instead of removing your rules all together, you may find it easier to convert them into general guidelines. For example, if you have been following the rule: “I must not eat chocolate”, you can convert this rule to the guideline: “I will not eat chocolate every day”. Remember – chocolate can be an *occasional* food for you. Guidelines are more user-friendly than rules. Guidelines do not have an all-or-nothing feel to them. They do not come over as dictatorial demands, so they do not bring on severe emotional consequences when they are not followed. Most healthy eaters have guidelines, such as: “I only eat ice-cream at weekends”, but if they go out with a friend mid-week and they end up eating ice-cream, they don’t worry about it. Ice-cream for them is an *occasional* food – they still don’t eat it every day.

However, not all of your rules should be converted to guidelines. Some rules ought to be totally eliminated as they do not lend themselves to a conversion to a healthy guideline. For example, if you have been using a rule such as: “I must only eat 800 calories a day”, this rule ought to go. This is because it is an unreasonably low daily calorie limit which is not only unhealthy (it can result in malnutrition and starvation) and unhelpful for your eating (it can lead to binge eating), but it is also unhelpful for your morale, as at some point you will break this rule and feel like a failure.



Take a moment to consider how you will cease your dietary rules. Are there any rules you would like to convert to guidelines? What rules should you remove completely? How will you make this work for you? Please write your thoughts below.

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If you are still having problems ceasing dietary rules, you may find it useful to use a Thought Diary, which we introduce in Module 4 of Information Pack B. You can use this strategy to address any difficulties you have in achieving behavioural change.



## **Fear of Weight Gain**

Many if not most women in Westernised societies – and some men - would like to lose weight and/or are afraid of gaining weight. Although this reflects a common body dissatisfaction, most people learn to live with this dissatisfaction without resorting to disturbed eating habits such as developing strict dietary rules.

### **Within the Healthy Weight Range?**

Once you have developed strict dietary rules, one of the main obstacles in overcoming them is your fear of gaining weight. It is likely that you started your disordered eating because you were unhappy with your shape or weight, and where you differed from most people is that you started using strict dietary rules. You may feel that if you stop using these rules, you will gain weight. However, as we have discussed, these rules are not an effective weight control method, because dietary rules encourage binge eating. If you stop following dietary rules, you will be able to stop binge eating. It is unlikely that you will gain weight unless you are underweight, and you may actually lose weight when you stop binge eating and replace it with regular, healthy eating.



### **Above the Healthy Weight Range?**

If you are binge eating and your weight is higher than the recommended healthy weight range, you may well be afraid of gaining even more weight and be trying to lose weight. It is possible that you have developed strict dietary rules, or at least a 'diet mentality', where you are not allowing yourself certain foods, and you are attempting to skip meals or attempting to restrict the amount of food you eat. As we have mentioned in previous modules and above, if you are dieting/restricting your food, you are setting yourself up to binge or at least overeat. We recommend regular eating and the loosening of dietary rules even to people whose weight is above average. You may actually lose weight when you stop binge eating and replace it with regular, healthy eating and healthy exercise.

### **Severely Underweight?**

However, you may be severely underweight if you are engaging in extreme dietary restriction. If this is the case, you will need to start a program of weight regain. *This self-help information pack is probably insufficient for you to achieve a healthy weight. We strongly recommend that you seek professional treatment, or at the very least go to your GP for a full physical check-up.* If you are underweight, your body is probably suffering for it.

As we mentioned in Module 1, starvation has physical, mental and social effects, and is dangerous in the short term and in the long term. Starvation causes physical changes such as a decrease in physical strength, heart conditions, giddiness, fatigue and hair loss. Being underweight leads to amenorrhoea, whereby females who have already begun menstruating stop having periods – and this results in loss of bone density, which can never be recovered. Mood is also influenced by starvation, whereby people experience poor concentration, apathy, depression, moodiness and irritability. Finally, social relationships suffer, whereby you experience social withdrawal and a loss of interest in friends and the outside world.

If you are underweight, you will undoubtedly find weight gain a daunting task. However, you may find it useful to try the following exercise, and identify reasons why you should regain weight.

Think about weight regain. What would be the positive benefits of gaining weight? (Remember that most of the negative physical consequences of starvation are reversed when weight is regained.) What are the costs of weight gain? Now consider remaining underweight. What are the benefits and costs of remaining underweight? Now balance the advantages of weight regain against the disadvantages. Use the Change Process Balance worksheet overleaf.



## Change Process Balance Sheet

Take a moment to think about your fear of weight gain...

<p><b>List the negative consequences of experiencing your current problem (being underweight).</b> Think about the difficulties that you are currently experiencing. (For example, perhaps you are feeling dizzy, or can't concentrate because of your preoccupation with food.)</p>	<p><b>List the positive aspects of experiencing your current problem (being underweight).</b> There are positives and negatives about almost every situation. (For example, perhaps you have been restricting food to numb painful feelings, or being skinny makes you feel special.)</p>
<p><b>List the personal benefits that you expect if you change yourself (regain some weight).</b> Think about reaching a healthier weight and how you will have to change in order to achieve it. (For example, perhaps you will be able to enjoy eating out with friends if you can learn to eat healthily.)</p>	<p><b>List the personal costs that you expect if you change yourself (regain some weight).</b> What do you think you'll need to give up in order to achieve a healthier weight? There are costs and benefits to almost all types of change. (For example, perhaps you'll have get out of your comfort zone.)</p>



As you become healthier and gain weight, you need to prepare yourself for the following changes:



- **Change in Body Shape.** As you gain weight you will notice a change in your body shape. However, you must remember that gaining weight is not the same thing as being overweight. As you become healthier you will be becoming less skinny, but not “fat”.
- **Clothes.** As you gain weight, you will need to wear clothes that are not as small as your old clothes. Please don’t wear old clothes that feel tight. Nobody feels good wearing clothes that are too tight. That will make you feel as if you are gaining too much weight, and it’s unhelpful.
- **Positive comments from others.** Prepare yourself for comments from other people about your change in weight. When people see you looking less emaciated than before, they might tell you that you look “well”. It is important that you do not interpret this comment as: “You look fat”. If you do have these thoughts, this might be the time to examine them. Recognise these compliments for what they are: people are glad to see you looking healthy and strong.

## Addressing Residual Binges

Even if you are following all the advice in this Information Pack, it is likely that you are still having an occasional binge. (Perhaps you are still binge eating often. If this is true for you, the next module will help you to review your progress and identify any barriers to change that might be impeding your progress, such as still restricting your food intake or experiencing difficulty in tolerating moods.)

It is important at this point to examine what is going on in every single binge. Then you can make appropriate changes. One good way of examining the “evidence” is through food logs. Are you still completing your food logs daily? In “real time”? Are you filling out that last column? You can learn a lot from what you write down about your thoughts and feelings and the situation.

We have addressed how dietary restraint and dietary restriction (and being underweight) can lead to binge eating. What else can contribute?

### Alcohol and drugs

It is common for people with problems to overuse alcohol or recreational drugs, or even some prescription drugs, to help them cope. Some ways in which they help are by making you “zone out”, feel numb, not care so much. But alcohol and many drugs are *disinhibitors*, that is, they lower your inhibitions. Say, for example, that you decided not to eat at night and instead you drink half a bottle of wine. This will lower your inhibitions about eating, which will make you more likely to break that rule of not eating. Some drugs, such as marijuana, increase your appetite and make it more likely that you will overeat (e.g., an attack of the munchies). The next day’s hangover may also adversely affect your eating pattern.

Once you start drinking or taking drugs, what role might alcohol or drugs play in any residual binges that you have? Do your best intentions not to binge disappear? Think about this for a few moments and write down some thoughts.

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## Crises/problematic events/negative mood

Sometimes, even with the best will in the world, people find it hard to stop binge eating. This can be because of chaos going on in their personal lives, unexpected upheavals, or a deterioration in mood, and the resulting heightened emotions. Does this describe what is going on in your life? If your life has suddenly been thrown into turmoil, this may not be the best time to be working at overcoming your eating disorder. Jot down some thoughts about this.

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If your life is currently in turmoil, please consider dealing with the other priorities in your life and then, when your situation is more stable, you can return to addressing your disturbed eating habits and weight control behaviours.



## Problem Solving

When you identify an obstacle – or, in fact, any problem - it can be useful to follow a problem solving strategy. You can apply the following strategy to help address any barriers to change that you have identified in your review process. Here is the procedure, and then we will practice:

1. Identify your problem. Be specific. (What is preventing you from achieving a goal?)
2. Consider all the possible solutions to your problem. You may think of solutions by reviewing previous modules, or you may develop some solutions of your own. Don't dismiss anything at this stage even if it does sound silly or unlikely.
3. Consider the pros and cons of each of your possible solutions. Is it achievable, and will it address all of the aspects of your problem?
4. Now, choose the best alternative.
5. Develop an action plan. Take time to consider how you will implement the plan in your life.
6. Next, act on your plan. Don't give up if change is hard to achieve in the short term. The more you work at it the easier change becomes.
7. Finally, evaluate the process. Examine how well you followed your plan. The important thing to remember when evaluating the process is not to be self-critical if the plan didn't work. Start at the beginning again, and you can find a solution that works for you.

Overleaf is an example of a completed worksheet designed to help you with problem-solving, and on Page 10 is a blank worksheet for you to complete. Remember, this is an extremely useful strategy that you can use in all areas of your life, not just with disturbed eating habits.



## **Problem Solving** **(Example)**

1. Identify your problem. Be specific.

*I always binge when I get home in the afternoon*

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2. Consider all the possible solutions to your problem. Brainstorm!

3. Consider a) the pros and b) the cons of each of your possible solutions. Is it achievable, and will it address all of the aspects of your problem?

<b>2) Possible solution</b>	<b>3a) Pros</b>	<b>3b) Cons</b>
<i>Don't come home after uni.</i>	<i>I wouldn't binge!</i>	<i>Impossible, I have to come home sometime</i>
<i>Eat before I come home</i>	<i>I would be less likely to binge if I'd eaten</i>	<i>I'd have to take food to uni</i>
<i>Do something else with friends before I come home</i>	<i>I wouldn't binge with them</i>	<i>I'd still binge when I got home</i>
<i>Binge before I go to uni!</i>	<i>That would get it out of the way</i>	<i>That's silly! I don't feel like binge eating in the mornings</i>

4. Now, choose the best alternative.

*Eat before I come home*

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5. Develop an action plan. Take time to consider how you will implement the plan in your life

*Take a snack to my afternoon classes so I can eat it before I come home and I will be less likely to binge*

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6. Next, act on your plan. Don't give up if change is hard to achieve in the short term. The more you work at it the easier change becomes.

*I'll start tomorrow.*

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7. Finally, evaluate the process. Examine how well you followed your plan. The important thing to remember when evaluating the process is not to be self-critical if the plan didn't work. Start at the beginning again, and you can find a solution that works for you.

*It went better than I'd expected. It was helpful to think through all the alternatives, it made me realise there were possible alternatives to my binge. It was a bit weird taking fruit to uni but I did it and it was OK. I still ate too much when I got home but it wasn't really a binge*

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# Problem Solving

1. Identify your problem. Be specific.

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2. Consider all the possible solutions to your problem. Brainstorm!

3. Consider the pros and cons of each of your possible solutions. Is it achievable, and will it address all of the aspects of your problem?

2) Possible solution	3a) Pros	3b) Cons

4. Now, choose the best alternative.

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5. Develop an action plan. Take time to consider how you will implement the plan in your life.

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6. Next, act on your plan. Don't give up if change is hard to achieve in the short term. The more you work at it the easier change becomes.

7. Finally, evaluate the process. Examine how well you followed your plan. The important thing to remember when evaluating the process is not to be self-critical if the plan didn't work. Start at the beginning again, and you can find a solution that works for you.

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## Module Summary

- A major way to cease dietary restraint is to stop avoiding certain foods.
- One of the main impediments to ceasing dietary restraint and restriction is the fear of weight gain.
- If you are not underweight, you should not gain weight if you stop dietary restraint. This is because you will simultaneously stop binge eating.
- If you are severely underweight, you will need to prepare yourself for weight regain, and may need professional help. It may be helpful to work out the pros and cons of change versus remaining at your current weight.
- It is important to identify the issues related to any residual binge eating, and identify any roadblocks to progress, such as alcohol or drugs, or life crises that may be diverting you from your progress.
- Learning a problem solving strategy is useful, as it can be applied in all areas of your life.

## 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.

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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.

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### ***Coming Up...***



In Module 9 (Progress Review & Barriers to Change) you will be encouraged to review your progress on changing behaviours.



## 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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