

What It's Like Being a Student with an Eating Disorder

How do University students cope with their eating disorders?

"Are you seriously going to Nando's? I thought you had an eating disorder." I felt a terrible urge to either curse the person who had just said that to me or to curse myself for even thinking about going to a fast food restaurant. My throat felt dry and sore as I opened my mouth to answer. Nothing came out. My ears were ringing – what was I supposed to say in a situation like this? A minute ago, I felt fine, and now it was like the earth was collapsing under my feet. Suddenly, food was the last thing I wanted.

This is not an uncommon story for people suffering with eating disorders. The idea that you can never eat if you have an eating disorder, and many other false stereotypes, affects more than 1.6 million people throughout the UK. Unfortunately, this number is only growing, and there are still many people out there who don't know much about eating disorders.

Eating disorders are not specific to any group; anyone can have one regardless of their gender, sexual orientation, age, or background. It's also important to note that there are multiple different types of eating disorders, and not all of them are restrictive. Some examples of eating disorders include bulimia, binge eating disorder, and anorexia. Eating disorders are the leading mental health condition resulting in loss of life. Studies have found that eating disorders are more common in people under the age of 25, which means that a lot of University students make that list too - whether you know it or not, one or more of your friends could be suffering from an eating disorder. The general fallacies and hurtful stereotypes around eating disorders can make it difficult to seek help and cope with the illness.

I decided to interview four University students about their experiences with eating disorders. I especially wanted to find out what aspects of University either make their disorder worse or help to cope with it. The first person I interviewed graduated a couple of years ago, majoring in an art subject. The second and third students I interviewed are both second years, the former studying a music degree and the latter a business degree. I also interviewed a fourth-year primary education student.

Did your eating disorder start at Uni? If you'd had it before, did you feel like it got better or worse at University?

1.

My eating disorder started before Uni, during my A-levels. I'd turned to the restriction of food for a sense of control that I didn't have anywhere else in my life at that point.

I actually started getting better when I was at Uni. I had complete control of my day and a sense of freedom to do whatever I wanted, which was something I had never had before.

2.

It was there before I came to Uni. However, it's definitely gotten worse at Uni. The eating disorder has been made worse by the stress of deadlines and exams - with everything going on, I just seek a sense of control. There's also this unspoken competitiveness at Uni because of the nature of my degree that causes me to feel like I have to be the best, and this includes being the best looking.

3.

It has been a part of my life for a long time, so it definitely didn't start at Uni. I've noticed that Uni makes it better and worse - it's very fluctuating. For example, during exams I hardly notice it. It's so easy to just have cramming sessions and forget about the pressures of having to look good. However, around the start of the year with all of the social gatherings, I pay more attention to the way I look compared to other people, and that's when it can get really bad.

4.

The eating disorder has been a part of my life since I was about 10 years old. It came around due to being a part of a world where being skinny was *the look*. During the first few years of Uni, I did feel like it escalated. As much as I tried to stop, it just seemed to get worse and worse. I went from barely eating anything to eating too much during my first few years of Uni and I just couldn't find a healthy balance at all. I never thought I would have control over it.

What's your living situation? Do you feel like this affects how you've dealt with your eating disorder? In what way?

1.

I used to live in halls, and it was the most difficult thing I have ever experienced. It was sometimes too much for me to walk into the kitchen, not knowing who would be in there. As time went on I found it harder and harder to go into the kitchen, as everyone else in my flat had gotten to know each other, and I felt even more excluded and scared. I limited my diet to things I could cook with hot water and snacks I could hide away in my room. However, at home, I would get a kick out of saying no to food whenever anyone would offer it to me (parents, friends etc.), but at Uni... no one was offering me food, so a large part of the (very warped) enjoyment of restricting myself had gone.

2.

I live with two friends in a private flat. I'd say it's better than living at home because I don't get along with my parents that well, and this time I've chosen the people I live with. It makes it easier to get away with not eating, though. I still get quite weird about eating in front of people and my flatmates seeing me cook – I don't want to be associated with food and eating at all, so anytime my flatmates see me around food I start feeling worse.

3.

I live with my partner in a private flat. For me, it's a good thing because they know about my eating disorder and make sure that I eat even when I really don't want to. It's almost like I have less stuff to worry about when I know that someone else is also taking care of me. They also give me plenty of support, which makes me feel accepted and diminishes anxiety a lot. I definitely feel safer living with another person than on my own.

4.

My living situation can cause my anxiety to escalate. For instance, throughout my first year at university, I was living with a very loud group of people who encouraged me to become someone I am not. That's when my anxiety started to really escalate. However, I am currently in student halls with four other girls and luckily, this has no negative effect on my eating disorder.

Is there anything you wish your University would do differently for people with eating disorders?

1.

I wish Universities would organise a meet and greet for the people within your flat. It should be standard for everyone to go into their kitchen or shared area and just have everyone there at the same time with a game or a box of snacks or something, as opposed to throwing together a bunch of people and just leaving them to it. Because people (such as myself) will fall through the cracks.

2.

I don't really know what kind of help for eating disorders is available at Uni. Maybe an awareness campaign? It's so easy to develop disorder behaviours and not even realize that it's an issue. I think it's especially easy for first years to start developing unhealthy habits with eating, so having the campaign to spread awareness would be a very good thing.

3.

I think the University should be more open about mental health. I know that there are a lot of options available if you search for them, but there are many cases when a person suffering from an eating disorder doesn't even know how to take that first step and actually figure out how to get help. If there were a more obvious campaign, or even more leaflets around the campus, I think more students would feel more comfortable about getting help.

4.

Although I have never gone to the university for help, I have witnessed situations that I completely disagree on. A tutor once said to my whole year group that students shouldn't make themselves ill whilst out on placement as it does not look good. This enraged me. An eating disorder is not something you can control 100% of the time. The university, in my opinion, should show a positive attitude to any disorder or illness and try to help rather than shutting you down.

What would you want people to know about eating disorders?

1.

It's shocking that this isn't common knowledge, but eating disorders aren't a skinny white girl's illness. It can happen to anyone. And I can tell you that I never lost any amount of weight from my restricted eating, no matter how hard I tried. Honestly, the amount of people who are shocked that fat people can't possibly develop disordered eating is ridiculous.

2.

There's definitely a misconception concerning the physical side of things. My body type isn't one that's stereotypically associated with a restrictive eating disorder, but that doesn't mean that I don't have one. Anyone could have an eating disorder. It doesn't have a look. Also, just because I have an eating disorder it doesn't mean that I never eat.

3.

It makes me angry when people think that some behaviours that are obviously not healthy are normal. A lot of the times I feel like they're seen as almost fashionable, which is awful. I would want people to know what type of behaviour is bad for you – if you've heard that students are supposed to starve themselves, it's not true! It's not healthy, nor should it be a norm for any students.

4.

I feel like a lot of people believe that eating disorders are for how we look and how we see ourselves. It's a very common stereotype that people with eating disorders are purely obsessed with looks. In reality, it's different – even the physical feeling of having food in your stomach can make you feel awful. It's not just about appearances, it's a much more deeply rooted problem.