

## Break Free from ED

*An Active Guide to Recovering from Your Eating Disorder*

### Module 8

## **Binge Eating**

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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.*

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## Introduction

By now, we hope you're eating regularly and enough and experimenting with including feared foods. We will now turn our attention to binge eating, which is a very common feature of eating disorders. Even people who don't have an eating disorder may binge eat from time to time. In this module we will explore what binge eating is, why it is a problem and how to reduce it. If you are unsure whether binge eating is an issue for you, read on and learn more.

## What Is Binge Eating?

**Objective binge eating** involves experiencing **loss of control over eating** and eating an **unusually large portion** of food in one sitting (e.g. 2-3 times as much as an average person might eat for a meal or snack). Many people describe feeling like they can't stop themselves from eating once they've started. This is often followed by intense feelings of guilt, disgust, and shame, and a desire to compensate in some way for energy that has been consumed during the binge (e.g. by vomiting or using laxatives).

### FACTS:

- Binge eating usually occurs in a short period of time (2 hrs), but can last a whole day for some
- Some people engage in binge eating many times in a day, others may only binge eat once in a while
- Sometimes binge eating is followed by purging, fasting or driven exercise
- Binge eating can occur in secret or in front of others

**Subjective binge eating** occurs when someone feels a loss of control over their eating but does not actually consume an objectively large amount of food. Subjective binges often reflect anxiety about eating.

**Overeating** is a normal behaviour that all people engage in from time to time – for example, having more to eat than usual at Christmas lunch, or out with friends, or when a particular food is just delicious! Overeating does not involve feeling out of control.

## Problems Associated with Binge Eating

Binge eating is a problem because of its physical and psychological impact, including:

- **Physical health problems:** Binge eating can lead to unstable blood sugars and disrupt typical hunger and fullness signals. It can also cause liver dysfunction and increased acid reflux, and make it difficult to work out your healthy set point weight range.
- **Negative emotions and thoughts:** Binge eating often makes people feel distressed, fuelling self-criticism and feelings of guilt, shame, and disgust – increasing the chances of another binge!
- **Avoidance and distress intolerance:** In the short-term, binge eating can provide a sense of comfort, distraction from upsetting emotions, or even euphoria. If you use binge eating to avoid or escape from distress then you won't learn to deal with these feelings in other more helpful ways and will likely continue to struggle the next time an upsetting experience arises.
- **Keeps the eating disorder going:** Binge eating increases concern about eating, weight, and shape and often leads to renewed attempts to control food intake or exercise to 'make up for' the binge. This keeps you stuck in a pattern of restriction and binge-eating that can be very difficult to break!

## What Triggers Binge Eating?

People often wonder why they are repeatedly engaging in binge eating episodes, even though they feel so distressed afterwards. There are three main reasons why this occurs.

### 1. Physical hunger

Some people binge eat because of the physiological effects of restriction. As discussed in Module 5, when you are not eating regularly, adequately, or enough variety, your clever body will attempt to correct the energy deficit so that it doesn't starve. Remember, it is impossible to eat adequately without eating enough complex carbohydrates! Eating inadequately can lead to thinking about food constantly, feeling overwhelming hunger, or a strong physiological drive to eat (even without obvious hunger signals), which triggers binge eating.

### 2. Psychological Hunger

In Module 7 we discussed that attempting to follow rigid dietary rules can also trigger binge eating. This is because we tend to think about and crave the exact foods that you are trying to avoid – that's just how brains work! This is sometimes referred to as **psychological hunger**. Plus, these rules are usually so rigid that they are impossible to follow and it's only a matter of time until they are broken. When a rule is broken, many people describe abandoning their diets for a short period, thinking 'I've failed so I may as well give up and get back on track tomorrow'. This **'all-or-nothing' thinking** is very common in people who engage in binge eating and can lead to repeated cycles of binge eating followed by strict weight control behaviours.

### 3. Distress

People sometimes describe binge eating as a way to regulate, control, or numb intense feelings. This might include boredom, anxiety, sadness, frustration, or other feelings people find negative or distressing in some way. Binge eating may also happen when people are wanting to escape unpleasant physical symptoms, such as being very tired, experiencing pain, or being physically uncomfortable in some other way.



## Understanding My Binge Eating

In Module 4 we introduced self-monitoring to record your patterns of eating and associated thoughts and feelings! Look at your self-monitoring *from the past week* and take some time to complete the worksheet below so you can better understand any binge eating that occurred.

How many times this week did you feel out of control of your eating? \_\_\_\_\_

How many binge eating episodes did you record? \_\_\_\_\_

How many of these were **objective**? \_\_\_\_\_

*Remember, subjective binge eating is just eating normally whilst feeling anxious – you don't need to do anything in response to these except tolerate your anxiety! Read on to find out how.*

**Where** and **when** do you tend to binge eat? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What **types** of foods do you usually eat during a binge? (list all typical 'binge foods', not just ones eaten this week)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Let's consider what triggers might have made you more likely to binge eat...

**PHYSICAL HUNGER:** Were you eating **regularly**? Had you eaten **enough**? Were there any large **gaps** in your eating?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**PSYCHOLOGICAL HUNGER:** Were you trying to follow any **strict dietary rules**? Did you **avoid** eating something you felt like?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**MOOD TRIGGERS:** Were you feeling **upset** (sad, anxious, angry etc.) about anything? Or were you feeling tired, bored, in pain or some other **uncomfortable feeling**?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What do you tend to **do** after a binge? Do you compensate in any way? (e.g. vomit, exercise, laxatives) Does it change your eating for the rest of the day, or the following day?

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\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## How to Reduce Binge Eating

Now that you know the factors that can contribute to binge eating and have used your self-monitoring to understand your own binge eating better, we want to help you learn strategies to reduce this behaviour.

**Remember**, you first need to be eating regularly, adequately and an appropriate variety of foods as covered in Modules 6 and 7. Without this structure in place it will be very difficult for the other strategies to be effective because physical hunger hasn't been addressed!

### Urge Surfing

People often describe having a strong 'urge' to binge that is hard to resist. This might be because they are very physically or psychologically hungry or because they are experiencing an intense emotion that they want to escape from. Not giving into an urge feels very uncomfortable or distressing in the short-term.

As you can see in the image, the urge to binge builds up over time like a wave – over minutes, hours, or even days. While it might feel like the urge is so strong that it will never pass on its own, we know that *all* urges become less intense over time (even the urge to scratch an itchy mosquito bite!). This is also true of our emotions – even the most intense emotions can't last forever, and we can learn to ride them out. Just like surfing a big wave will feel difficult at first, the wave will get smaller. Urge surfing means tolerating your own anxiety long enough for it to pass.



We know what you're thinking – this is all easier said than done. Urge surfing can be very challenging to begin with. You might think '*If I don't binge, this feeling will never pass!*' or '*I just can't tolerate this feeling!*'. This is understandable. Urge surfing takes time and practice to develop. With practice, you will find the experience less distressing and find that the urge passes more quickly.

### **Delaying the Urge**

**TIP:** Urge surfing requires being tuned into your experiences. It's about being aware of your triggers and early warning signs, so that you can start to intervene *before* the urge feels completely overwhelming. You have already started tuning into these experiences using self-monitoring.

Sometimes, people find it more manageable to try **delaying** binge eating. Rather than trying to just stop straight away you can start by delaying the binge for a short time period initially. You may be able to set a goal to delay binge eating for 30 minutes, or if that feels too hard you may start with a delay of 5 - 10 minutes. We recommend setting a timer on your phone so that you're not watching the clock while waiting for the time to pass.

When the timer goes off you can check in with yourself and notice what has happened to the urge. To begin with, if the urge still feels very strong at this time, you may still choose to binge, but be sure to note in your monitoring that you were able to delay this for 15 minutes. Once you've mastered a 15-minute delay, you can begin to increase the delay to 30, 60, 90 minutes etc. Before long, you'll find that you have been able to surf the urge to the point that it has passed, and you managed to abstain from binge eating altogether!



## Distraction

To help you surf the urge to binge eat, you can engage in a distracting activity. It is best to choose an activity that keeps you physically and/or mentally busy, and that prevents you from eating while you're doing it.

Below you will find some examples of distraction activities.

This list is just a starting point - try some activities when you're experiencing an urge to binge and find out what works for you. Remember, the aim of these activities is not to take your distress away, but to practice *tolerating* your distress until it passes. Highlight at least 3 activities that you will try over the coming week or come up with your own ideas and write them down below.



- Do some gardening or clean the house
- Play with a fidget toy or stress ball
- Read a book or magazine
- Play a game or do a puzzle
- Mindful colouring
- Listen to a light-hearted podcast
- Watch your favourite movie or TV show (*something you know makes you feel happy*)
- Call a friend (*you don't have to talk about feeling distressed unless you want to, sometimes it helps just to chat about other things*)
- Light a candle and focus on the flame, the scent
- Look at beautiful art, scenery, or listen to music
- Mindfully apply your favourite scent or moisturiser
- Take a bath or shower
- Spend time patting your pet
- Soak your feet or give yourself a pedicure/manicure
- Slowly tense and release all your muscles
- Focus on counting to 10 and breathing slowly
- Go for a gentle walk around the block
- Wash the dishes mindfully

### My distraction activities:

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#### EXTRA TIPS:

- Avoid going to the shops if you are tempted to buy food for a binge
- Place your credit/debit card in a hard-to-reach space (e.g. the boot of your car when driving)
- Delete food delivery service apps off your phone temporarily, and unlink your payment method
- Try not to isolate yourself – you are less likely to binge eat around other people
- Even if you only delay your binge by a few minutes – congratulate yourself on this success!

## My Urge Surfing Log

Use the following table to create your own urge surfing plan guided by the example. Next time you have an urge to binge, record the urge in this log and then try to experiment with urge surfing and distraction to see what happens. Review the outcome so you can see what was helpful, or what you might need to work on or try differently next time.

Time	Binge Urge Rate strength (0-10)	Trigger e.g. hunger, breaking a rule, mood, feeling bloated	My delay/distraction plan	Review what happened
3pm	7/10	I am feeling really stressed after a meeting at work	I am going to try to delay this binge by 10 minutes, and in that time I am going to go for a slow walk around the block.	I went for a walk and then called a friend and was able to delay by 20 minutes. I ended up bingeing but ate much less than I normally do.

At first, you might need to use delay and distract methods to help you ride the urge. Over time, you might feel more comfortable and confident riding the urge without having to do anything else at all.

### MINDFUL EATING.

If you're trying your hardest to practice urge surfing, but still end up binge eating, try being **mindful!**

This involves:

- Putting your food on a plate and putting the rest back in the fridge/cupboard
- Sitting down at the table, putting away your phone and turning off the TV
- Tuning in to the taste, textures and smell of the food in a curious, non-judgmental way
- Record your experience in your self-monitoring

By doing these things, you are more likely to get out of 'autopilot' mode and notice when you start to get full, be more aware of your eating experience and feel more satisfied earlier on. Just this awareness can help you to slow down and reduce the length and/or size of your binge eating episode.

## Getting Back on Track After a Binge

It takes time to learn new skills and change behaviours, and while you're working through this process you may find there are still times when binge eating occurs. It is important to avoid being overly critical of yourself, as this will likely only maintain the cycle. Use this as a learning opportunity and figure out what tweaks and adjustments you can make going forward to further reduce your risk of binge eating.

The best thing you can do after a binge eating episode is get straight back on track with regular eating and have something to eat when it's time for your next meal or snack. Even if you don't feel hungry, or are more full than usual, just have something small and focus on regular eating for the rest of the day. Lapses are a normal part of recovery, and each time this happens **and** you learn from the lapse, you will get better at preventing it next time!

If you notice any other triggers that are increasing your risk of binge eating (such as drinking alcohol, being stressed at work, or feeling very tired) it may be helpful to reduce or remove these triggers for now as much as possible until you are more confident in managing your binge eating. This might mean abstaining from alcohol for a while, taking special care to get enough rest, or reducing other stressors while working on breaking free from your eating disorder.





## 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?

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Third, review your homework from last week:

Task	Completed? Y/N
Weekly weighing	
Completing self-monitoring daily, and in real-time	
Eating regularly	
Eating adequately	
Feared food experiments	

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

*(e.g., weekly weighing, complete self-monitoring every day; focus on eating 3 meals and 2-3 snacks; experiment with feared foods and tick them off my feared food list, use delay and distract methods, complete urge surfing log)*

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## Module Summary

- Many people with an eating disorder engage in binge eating
- Binge eating involves a sense of loss of control over eating, and often involves eating a very large amount of food
- Binge eating contributes to a range of physical and psychological health problems
- The three main triggers for binge eating are physical hunger, psychological hunger, and distress; you can use self-monitoring to better understand triggers for your binge eating
- For any binge eating behaviours still popping up after you have addressed physical and psychological hunger (Module 6 + 7), you can use urge surfing and delay and distraction. Use the Urge Surfing Log to record your plan and review your progress.
- It is important to get back on track with regular eating as soon as possible after a binge episode.

### Coming up... Purging

## About the Modules

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### REFERENCES

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

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### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Professor Glenn Waller (University of Sheffield), Professor Tracey Wade (Flinders University) and Dr. Louise Andony for their expert review of these modules. We would also like to acknowledge Dr. Sarah-Ashley Robbins from the Gaudiani Clinic for her review of select medical information and thank the entire Eating Disorders team at the Centre for Clinical Interventions.

### IMAGES

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### “BREAK FREE FROM ED”

This module forms part of:

Targowski, K., Bank, S., Carter, O., Campbell, B. & Raykos, B. (2022). *Break Free from ED*. Perth, Western Australia: Centre for Clinical Interventions

ISBN: 978-0-9757995-2-9

Created: July, 2022