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Overcoming Binge Eating

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- Stick to practical and healthy eating habits
- Finally! Discover answers to not only how but why

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by Jennie J. Kramer and Marjorie Nolan Cohn

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Overcoming Binge Eating For Dummies®

Published by: **John Wiley & Sons, Inc.**, 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030-5774, www.wiley.com

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2013942772

ISBN 978-1-118-55087-8 (pbk); ISBN 978-1-118-55090-8 (ebk); ISBN 978-1-118-55092-2 (ebk); ISBN 978-1-118-55093-9 (ebk)

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Introduction

Do you eat when you feel stressed, sad, or angry? Do you sometimes follow strict diets only to find yourself out of control with food when you return to “normal” eating patterns? Do certain foods or situations inevitably set off an unstoppable urge to eat? Has the quantity of food you eat had a negative impact on your health? Do you feel desperate and hopeless after an eating binge? Have you ever wondered whether you have a problem with binge eating?

If you answered “yes” to any or all of these questions, you’re reading the right book. Whether you’re just starting to realize that there’s a problem or have known it for a while, the information, ideas, and strategies we provide can help get you started on the road to healing and sustainable recovery from binge eating or any other type of overeating. This book is your road map to systematically but gently identify and change the feelings and behaviors that drive your binge eating.

If you identify yourself as a binge eater, you may be ready to take action today. But even if you don’t feel that your habits completely fit with what’s described as binge eating disorder, you can still benefit from these strategies as you address why you eat for reasons other than physical hunger. No matter where you are in your journey, this book can help you improve your health and well-being.

Depending on the severity of your struggles with food and eating, you may frequently recognize yourself (or someone you love) and your behaviors during the course of reading this book. Perhaps you’ve been formally diagnosed with binge eating disorder or self-diagnosed as an emotional eater. Left unchecked and untreated, disordered eating of any kind worsens over time, and the habits and behaviors become that much more entrenched. The sooner you seek support, the better.

Hopefully, it’s heartening to know that you don’t have to go it alone — we’ll be with you every step of the way as you begin to understand binge eating and exactly what to do about it. We hope that this book is just what you need to finally make a difference in your physical and emotional well-being.

You may use it as a jumping-off point for seeking professional help in a more informed way. With compassion towards yourself and a deeper understanding of the fact that binge eating didn't develop overnight and will take some time to change, you can achieve sustainable results.

About This Book

Although binge eating disorder (BED) has been understood and treated by professionals for some time now, the publication of this book coincides with the first formal inclusion of the diagnosis BED in the *DSM-V* (fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*), which is used for all psychiatric diagnoses. Recognizing binge eating disorder as a diagnosable condition alongside other eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa represents an important shift in the understanding and treatment of binge eating.

To get the most out of this book, you don't need to start at the beginning and read straight through, although reading the entire book, in whatever order you choose, will certainly benefit you in the long run. Put another way, like a good meal, take what you want and leave the rest. In fact, you often see us use food metaphors in discussing various aspects of the disorder because attitudes about food and eating extend to most other areas of life including money and relationships. That may sound strange, but as you read through, you'll undoubtedly make the connections.

Also feel free to skip sidebars and anything marked with a Technical Stuff icon. We've written them to enhance and deepen the material in each chapter, but they're not essential to understanding what you need to know.

It's useful to note that each chapter and section stand alone, so if you prefer, you can begin wherever you like, picking and choosing what's most helpful to you in learning about and reframing your long-held views and reflexive responses to food and emotions. You may even want to revisit certain sections repeatedly in order to more fully grasp new concepts, strategies, and practical ideas in a way that works for you.

Within this book, you may note that some web addresses break across two lines of text. If you're reading this book in print and want to visit one of these web pages, simply key in the web address exactly as it's noted in the text, as if the line break doesn't exist. If you're reading this as an e-book, you've got it made — just click the web address to be taken directly to the recommended web page.

Foolish Assumptions

If you picked up this book, we assume that you fit into at least one of the following categories:

- ✔ **You're a binge eater, or you suspect you may be.** Healing and recovering from an eating disorder of any kind doesn't happen overnight even if you'd like that to be the case. Whether you're at the beginning of the journey and just realizing that you may have a problem or a bit farther down the path and looking for further motivation and resources, you'll find what you need in this book.
- ✔ **You love someone who's a binge eater.** Watching someone you love struggle with binge eating in its various forms can be extremely difficult. We wrote this book not only for people struggling with binge eating, compulsive overeating, or emotional eating but also for loved ones affected by someone else's disordered eating.
- ✔ **You're a professional who treats people who suffer from disordered eating or related issues and conditions.** Perhaps you treat people with all kinds of eating disorders, related psychological conditions, and/or the physical consequences that may result. Of course you know your stuff, but this book offers a quick, practical, and layman-friendly reference guide that you and your patients can use together.

Icons Used in This Book

Throughout the book, we use icons in the margins to call special attention to certain paragraphs. Keep an eye out for the following symbols.



This book is chock full of practical information you can use now and in the future. When we use a tip icon, we're highlighting a specific idea or technique we've found particularly useful for almost everyone we've treated over the years.



We cover a lot of ground in this book, but what we know about eating disorders and how to treat them often stems from a few key ideas and philosophies. When you see a remember icon, we're either reminding you of something we've written about before or stressing how important it is to keep one of these central ideas in mind as you read.



Eating disorders can have a long-term impact on your psychological and physical health. When we use a warning icon, we want you to take into account that your well-being is your top priority as well as ours.



Dealing with binge eating encompasses many different subjects: medicine, psychology/behavior, physiology, nutrition, cultural awareness, and more. Sometimes we delve more deeply into these areas, and we label that exploration with a technical stuff icon. You don't have to read those paragraphs to get the big picture of a section or chapter, but you certainly may want to if you're seeking more in-depth information.

Beyond the Book

In addition to the material in the print or e-book you're reading right now, this book comes with an eCheat Sheet you can access on the web anywhere, anytime at www.dummies.com/cheatsheet/overcomingbingeeating. The articles there address a range of binge-eating tips:

- ✓ Don't know where to start or need a reminder of how to eat a healthy, satisfying diet that will sustain you both mentally and physically? Check out ten ideas for eating healthfully.
- ✓ Even though it may be uncomfortable to think about, binge eating poses serious short- and long-term risks to your health. For an idea of what you need to be on the lookout for, we include a list of the most significant medical risks.
- ✓ If you're reading this book because you have a friend or loved one who suffers from binge eating, we offer tips to help you stay on the right track in your efforts to support someone else's recovery from disordered eating.
- ✓ Perhaps you're struggling with the urge to binge right now. Take this list of alternate activities with you everywhere and turn to them when you need ideas for something you can do to distract yourself that's meaningful and engaging, not just a time-filler.

Where to Go from Here

You can start wherever you like in *Overcoming Binge Eating For Dummies*; you don't have to begin with Chapter 1 and read straight through to get the information you need to understand and begin to recover from binge eating. For example, if you're interested in sampling a smorgasbord of the treatments out there, skip to Chapter 10 to get a sense of all your options. If you're looking for motivation, Chapters 7 and 9 are good starting places. If you want to dive right into nutrition, Chapter 12 has lots of tools and tips for meal planning and coping skills for dealing with food. And if you're the friend or family member of someone who binges, Chapter 21 is the first in a series of chapters about how to help someone you love get better.

Part I

Binge Eating Disorder: What It Is and What It Isn't



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In this part . . .

- ✓ Identify the components of binge eating disorder (BED) and other eating disorders. Distinguish BED from compulsive overeating, emotional overeating, and the nervosas — anorexia and bulimia.
- ✓ Look into possible reasons for developing an eating disorder. Heredity and environment both play a role in the emergence of many eating disorders.
- ✓ Realize that BED is an addiction recognized by the American Psychiatric Association with a variety of effective treatment methods.
- ✓ Understand that BED and other disordered eating habits result in both physical and psychological ailments. In the same vein, existing physical and emotional disorders may contribute to the development of eating disorders.

Chapter 1

The World of Binge Eating Disorder

In This Chapter

- ▶ Uncovering the realities of binge eating disorder
 - ▶ What binge eating is and what it isn't
 - ▶ Deciding to get help and finding the right treatment
 - ▶ Supporting others and keeping healthy yourself
-

For some people, hunger is simply a physical sensation usually satisfied by a moderate amount of food. For others, physical hunger is mistaken for what we call emotional hunger, and eating food becomes a misguided attempt to soothe away the worries and upsets of life.

When you think about it, the fact that many people have eating disorders isn't really surprising. Eating and nourishment is so primal; suckling is the very first instinct you act upon after you're born. Throughout your life, eating is a fundamental part of many social, cultural, and family rituals. It therefore makes sense that many people use food as a way to get a different kind of nurturance and to self-soothe during difficult situations. Similar to drugs, alcohol, and other additive substances, food can come to be seen as a great source of temporary comfort.

But when eating becomes a primary contributor to your problems rather than a solution to them, it's a surefire sign that you need to look at your eating habits. If, for instance, you overeat to the point of physical pain or discomfort, hide your excessive eating from others, and/or feel intense shame and guilt over how much you consume, you may want to consider that you have a problem you may not be able to resolve on your own. That problem is called binge eating disorder.

In this chapter, we explore what binge eating actually means and how to determine whether you suffer from binge eating disorder (BED) or an eating disorder of any kind. We discuss a few of the many available treatments

and identify who suffers from binge eating. Finally, we address those of you who may be struggling to support and help a friend or loved one who's a binge eater.

Examining Binge Eating Disorder: What it Is and What it Isn't

Binge eating disorder (BED) isn't simply having an extra piece of cake at a birthday party or overeating during the holidays or on vacation. It's a serious, progressive condition that affects both the body and mind and may drive you to eat in response to something other than physical hunger. This simple definition of binge eating, and all emotional or compulsive overeating for that matter, is a useful way to think about the whole issue. (We explain the range of eating disorders in Chapter 2.)



Simply put, *disordered eating* is eating in response to something other than physical hunger. Notice the non-judgmental simplicity with which you can start to think about disordered eating by referring to it this way.

During a binge, you lose control and can consume many thousands of calories in an attempt to numb unwanted negative emotions. Up until May 2013, clinically speaking, binge eating had been classified as EDNOS, or eating disorder not otherwise specified. As of the publication of the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V)*, binge eating disorder was officially recognized as a distinct and definable condition, which hopefully allows for more reimbursable treatment options as well as more research into the causes of and most effective treatments available for this complex disorder. (The EDNOS classification itself is now *other specified feeding or eating disorder*, or OSFED.)

Defining binge eating

What does it mean to binge? The criteria are clearer now than they've ever been and yet you may still have picked up this book wondering if how you eat qualifies you as someone suffering from binge eating disorder. The *DSM-V* sets out the following criteria:

- ✓ Eating a larger amount of food than normal in a short period of time
- ✓ Losing control during the binge episode
- ✓ Bingeing at least once per week for at least three months
- ✓ Not using any sort of compensatory behaviors like purging or exercising

We discuss these criteria in more depth in Chapter 2, but if this list starts you thinking about some of your own behaviors, you've come to the right place. When you're ready to embrace and tackle the issues, this book can help you not only figure out what to do but why and how to do it.

Even if you flip through these first chapters and decide that you don't technically suffer from binge eating disorder, the information you uncover about compulsive or emotional eating may still resonate strongly with you. Whatever form your disordered eating takes, you can surely benefit from the ideas and strategies in these chapters. You may even feel inspired or motivated to take a step beyond the guidance offered here and seek out professional treatment, if needed.

Dealing with the consequences of binge eating

Binge eating, compulsive overeating, and emotional eating take a toll on the mind and body. Although some binge eaters may maintain an average weight, most become overweight or obese and suffer from chronic diseases associated with excess weight. If you're a binge eater, you probably already know that you're at increased risk for heart disease, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, metabolic diseases, and diabetes among many other conditions. (Chapter 4 talks about physical and emotional health concerns.)

Perhaps you also experience some of the psychological or emotional causes and effects of binge eating. For example, depression, anxiety, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), and other disorders can be part of a complicated system that triggers and/or exacerbates binge eating.

In the final analysis, the whole complex of emotions, experiences, and behaviors may leave you feeling desperate, hopeless, and increasingly socially isolated, all of which can make the urge to binge even greater.

Accepting the Reality of an Eating Disorder

Many binge eaters must deal with lives that feel out of control almost all the time. Even if you try to ignore the persistent thoughts, feelings, and urges you have with regard to food, it isn't enough to overcome your drive to binge eat or overeat. However, as much as you'd like help and a way to heal yourself, it can be difficult to acknowledge that you have a problem.

If you've picked up this book, chances are you're struggling with disordered eating of some kind, and no matter what label you put on it, making changes would benefit you both physically and psychologically in the long run.

Seeing the signs

No matter the exact form your overeating takes, you may still be telling yourself that it's no big deal or that it's not a real problem (although you're reading this book, so you're at least a bit suspicious). If, in fact, you've readily acknowledged that you have a problem, you may be struggling to find some way to keep it from taking over your life. Or perhaps you're at a more advanced stage and the bingeing has already put your health and/or your relationships in jeopardy.

Whatever stage you're in, the signs that you may be in trouble from using food to soothe yourself are relatively easy to spot if you know what to look for. When you're bingeing or overeating in any way:

- ✓ **You feel out of control.** The hallmark of binge eating is a sense that you cannot stop regardless of whether you want to or your body hurts from taking in so much food.
- ✓ **You turn to food to deal with negative emotions or situations you feel you can't cope with in any other way.** At the beginning, bingeing may have helped you feel better, at least temporarily. Now, it creates as many or more problems than it resolves, but you don't know what else to do but eat.
- ✓ **You keep your eating habits a secret.** In eating as in the rest of life, if you're desperate to keep something a secret, it's probably not a good sign. You try as best you can to make sure that no one knows anything about how, what, when, where, or why you're eating, and this in and of itself suggests you may have a problem.
- ✓ **You feel utter regret when the binge is over.** You may promise yourself every time that you won't binge again, and when you do binge, you're overwhelmed by shame, guilt, grief, and desperation. What's even worse is that these negative emotions simply perpetuate the continuous cycle of feeling bad and then eating for release. Of course, it's more complicated than that, but over time, the hopelessness that descends upon you is one factor that makes the situation worse.

Deciding to make a change

If you're a binge eater, compulsive overeater, or emotional eater, you've probably already tried every diet under the sun more than once. Maybe some of them work for a while, but eventually you fall back into old routines and end up right back where you started or even worse off than where you began.

Most binge eaters mentally beat themselves up on a regular basis by telling themselves that it was just a matter of not having will power, that even trying to stop bingeing is stupid and hopeless. These conclusions are painfully and needlessly punishing and also just not so.



The reasons that diets don't work are because

- ✓ **Diets don't ever work.** Diets just create an inevitable pendulum swing of deprivation and cravings, both emotionally and physically.
- ✓ **Binge eating, as with all disordered eating, actually has nothing to do with food.** Yes, you read that right. Strange as it may sound, food is just the available weapon, if you will.

You may be scratching your head, wondering what in the world we're talking about, but as you may have already noticed, focusing only on food when it comes to tackling these issues simply isn't working. Instead, when you're ready to make a change, you have to find other reasons that will help finally flip the switch for you.



Everyone's different, and your personal motivations for slowly putting a stop to binge eating are likely quite different from the reasons that motivate other binge eaters. However, many people who've successfully put binge eating behind them have some of these strategies in common:

- ✓ **Take time to get ready.** Slowing and eventually ending binge eating or overeating of any kind is a marathon and not a sprint. Even though you may be eager to jump in and make changes immediately, if you can step back for a moment, be clear about your motives, gather any pertinent information, and make an action plan, preferably with strategic support from others, you'll set yourself up for long-term success.
- ✓ **Focus on possibility.** Whether it's imagining all you'll be able to do with your life when eating doesn't dominate your day-to-day thinking or concentrating on the small successes you have along the way, overcoming your disordered eating in large part depends on the idea that if you can see it, you can have it. If you can see it, you can be it. It's a leap of faith to imagine what until now has seemed to be unimaginable. This is an essential strategy for many areas of life.

- ✔ **Set realistic goals and reward yourself for meeting them.** Making major changes in the way you eat and, more importantly, the way you think about eating takes time and determination. By establishing small milestones along the way, bite-size pieces, so to speak, you give yourself time to learn new ways of being in the world and give yourself an opportunity to celebrate incremental success in ways that motivate and inspire you. In other words, portion out change rather than bingeing on it. (Caution: The food metaphors have just begun . . . many more to come!)

Chapter 7 addresses motivation in more depth.

Seeking treatment and support

Successful treatment comes in all shapes and sizes. Although some binge eaters choose to see a team of eating-disorder professionals, others may not be able or willing to tackle every issue simultaneously.

No matter how enthusiastic and ready you are to move forward, recovery can be emotionally and physically challenging, and taking an approach that makes the most sense to you and pacing yourself in a way that feels comfortable are two ways of building a foundation upon which you can evolve as you begin to heal.

In this book, we take a three-pronged approach to recovery:

- ✔ **Medical/Physiological:** Binge eating can take a serious toll on your health, so as you begin to think about getting better, the first stop is your doctor's office. You may already be in regular contact with your physician about ongoing health issues, or you may have been avoiding a visit for a long time. Either way, it's important to discuss the fact that you've been struggling with binge eating in addition to addressing any of the chronic conditions that may have developed as a result of overeating such as obesity, high blood pressure, heart disease, and diabetes — to name just a few.

Aside from the medical piece of healing from binge eating, there are broad physiological considerations, particularly with respect to learning how to understand your whole body. For instance, as you recover, you learn or relearn how to assess your hunger and fullness accurately and appropriately by listening to the signals your body sends you before and after meals.

You can also discover how to move your body in a way that feels healthy and positive. Over time, healthy forms of exercise and movement can help establish a better sense of self and improve your body image.

- ✓ **Psychological:** Healing from disordered eating of any kind, and bingeing in particular, starts with an understanding of the underlying psychological conditions, thoughts, and feelings that lead you to conclude, consciously or otherwise, that overeating is the best way to cope. Even though it may be difficult or uncomfortable at times, understanding your deepest motives and developing a willingness to address longstanding behavior and thought patterns are essential to the process of ending binge eating.
- ✓ **Nutritional:** A dietitian specializing in eating disorders can help you establish new strategies when it comes to food. If you're a chronic binge eater, you may have forgotten or you may never have known what it means to nourish yourself. A dietitian can give you the nutritional support you need to get started and the pointers you'll want to make changes that work for you along the way.

Chapter 10 talks about the professional and peer support system you may tap into as you head toward recovery.



Don't let yourself become overwhelmed by what lies ahead. You don't have to take it all on at once, and in fact, if you're trying to stop bingeing, it probably makes sense to tackle your recovery in bite-size pieces with the same moderate, gentle approach you're planning to take towards food, eating, and yourself now and in the future.

Taking Steps to Get Better

Recovering from binge eating or any kind of compulsive overeating isn't an overnight process. It's taken months or years to arrive at this point, and getting better takes time as well as determination. You have to be willing to gently, but resolutely, look at yourself in the mirror and slowly change the thoughts and behaviors that aren't good for you at the same time that you learn to accept yourself for who you are. It's not a straightforward or linear affair, but with patience and hard work, you can make a healthier and happier life for yourself.

To be or not to be an addiction — that's the question

Addiction is a complicated word and one that may be overused in modern culture, but when it comes to binge eating, it can be helpful to think of it as an addictive behavior.

New research shows that the way the bodies and brains of binge eaters react to food mimics the way other addicts respond to the substances and/or behaviors of their addictions. Images of the brain, particularly PET (positron emission tomography) scans and functional MRIs (magnetic resonance images), taken during a food binge, an alcohol binge, and while using cocaine or heroin are virtually identical and show almost identical stimulation of the pleasure centers in the brain. Whether this means that binge eating is an addiction is still an uncertain, but the physiological similarities are so strong that it's certainly a useful idea to consider during recovery.

Whereas the goal for most other addictions is to achieve abstinence, this is obviously not the case with binge eating. You have to eat to survive. Coming to terms with the idea that you must establish a lifelong relationship with food is one of the complex realities of facing down binge eating, compulsive overeating, or any form of disordered eating. In fact, among Overeaters Anonymous members, one aphorism is that “when you are addicted to drugs you put the tiger in the cage to recover; when you are addicted to food you put the tiger in the cage, but take it out three times a day for a walk.” To be clear, in no way are we making light of the plight of all those who take the courageous journey to beat any addiction. But those involving food are that much more complex in this way.

Continuing research into the way that eating, and certain foods in particular, activate the pleasure centers in the brains of binge eaters and into how and why binge eaters tend to gain weight more easily may ultimately result in different treatment paradigms. However, here and now, thinking of binge eating as an addiction only matters if it helps you reframe the way you think about your own relationship to food and eating and if it changes how others view your behaviors. If people in your life judge you as being lazy or having no discipline, explaining that BED is a recognized addiction may promote a more helpful attitude.

No matter how you feel about it, being flexible and curious on your journey helps you pick and choose the ideas and strategies that'll be most useful, meaningful, and motivating for you along the way.

Considering professional treatment

By its very nature, binge eating is a condition that tends to isolate its sufferers. You've probably tried your best to keep your eating habits and how you feel about yourself and food a secret from most people you know, even those closest to you. You also may have tried to get better on your own without long-lasting success. Hopefully, something in this book will help propel you into meaningful and sustainable change.