

# S.a.n.a.

## SLEEP AND EATING BEHAVIOR IN ADOLESCENCE



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# INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is commonly described as a developmental period characterized by profound physical and psychological changes, increased instability, and the disruption of previously established balances. While some of this can be true, being a teenager doesn't automatically mean being unhappy or struggling. Think about how many calm, confident teens you know and how many adults still have a hard time.

During adolescence, young people face important challenges. These include defining their identity, establishing a sense of belonging within peer groups, and navigating their first romantic relationships. At this stage, the brain is already very good at feeling strong emotions—but it's still learning how to manage them. This means emotions can sometimes feel overwhelming and may lead to risky or unhealthy behaviors.

This short guide focuses on two things that are essential for both physical and mental health: sleep and eating. During adolescence, both can be affected by hormonal changes, stress, school schedules, social life, and daily habits. Problems with sleep and eating can make you feel more anxious, sad, tired, or unmotivated. At the same time, stress and emotional struggles can also disrupt how and when you sleep or eat, creating a difficult cycle.

In this guide, we'll talk about what healthy sleep and eating really mean, which warning signs to pay attention to, and what strategies can help you find balance again. We'll also explain when and how to ask for professional help if things feel too hard to manage alone.

# SLEEP HANDBOOK

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**SLEEP**

**CHAPTER 1:** What is sleep, why do we need it,  
and how does it work?



## WHAT IS SLEEP AND WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT?

Sleep is not just “doing nothing”, it’s a basic process that keeps us alive and healthy. We spend about one third of our lives sleeping. If sleep weren’t important, evolution would have gotten rid of it long ago. In fact, sleeping can be risky, because when we sleep we’re less aware of what’s happening around us. And yet, sleep is still essential.

That’s because sleep helps the brain and body work properly. It affects how we feel, how we think, and how we handle everyday life. Sleep helps regulate emotions, improve memory and learning, manage stress, and keep the body healthy. It’s not just about resting it’s about recharging.

## HOW DOES SLEEP WORK?

Sleep is partly controlled by biology, but it’s also influenced by habits. What time you go to bed, where you sleep, and what you do before sleeping all affect how easily you fall asleep and how well you rest. This means sleep is not only a biological process, but also a learned behavior.

### The biological side of sleep: the two-process model

Sleep is regulated by two main biological systems:

- *Sleep pressure (homeostatic process)*: the longer you stay awake, the sleepier you become. This makes it easier to fall asleep at night.
- *Body clock (circadian rhythm)*: your body follows a daily rhythm that tells you when it’s time to be awake and when it’s time to sleep. Light and darkness play a big role in this.

You fall asleep most easily when these two systems work together when you’ve been awake long enough and your body clock is ready for sleep. This timing can be different for everyone, especially during adolescence.

### The habit side of sleep: learning and associations

Sleep is also shaped by habits and routines. Over time, your brain learns to connect certain places, activities, and thoughts with sleep. Just like seeing food can make you hungry, getting into bed can signal your brain that it’s time to sleep.

When falling asleep usually happens easily, the bed becomes a “safe” place linked to relaxation. But when someone often struggles to fall asleep, the bed and bedroom can start to feel stressful. Worry, frustration, and anxiety can then make sleep even harder. This is one of the reasons why sleep problems, like insomnia, can last over time.



## CHAPTER 2: What does it mean to sleep well?



## WHEN DO WE ACTUALLY SLEEP WELL?

It sounds like an easy question, but the answer isn't so simple. Do we sleep well when we sleep a lot? But what does "a lot" even mean? Is it when we fall asleep quickly? Or when we wake up feeling refreshed? Sleeping well is not just about one thing. We sleep well when several factors work together.

We sleep well when:

- *We sleep enough:* There isn't one perfect number of hours that works for everyone. People need different amounts of sleep to feel their best. For most teens between 14 and 17 years old, the recommended amount is 8 to 10 hours per night. Some people feel very good with 8 hours, others need 9 or even 10. All of these are completely normal as long as you wake up feeling rested and can function well during the day.
- *We sleep at the right times:* You might think that sleeping eight hours is enough, no matter when it happens, but actually timing matters. Our bodies are designed to sleep at night, when it's dark, and to be awake during the day. Sleeping during the day and staying awake at night can confuse the body's natural rhythm and make sleep less restorative. Having a regular sleep schedule also helps. Going to bed and waking up at similar times allows your body to "learn" when it's time to sleep, making it easier to fall asleep and wake up feeling better.
- *We sleep without too many interruptions:* Healthy sleep usually means that once you go to bed, you fall asleep fairly easily and sleep through the night. Everyone has the occasional bad night trouble falling asleep or waking up during the night is normal. It becomes a problem only when it happens often and starts to affect how you feel, think, or function during the day.
- *We wake up feeling rested:* Think about how good it feels to wake up in the morning feeling refreshed and ready to start the day. This happens when you feel satisfied with your sleep and feel like your body and mind have had enough rest.
- *We feel alert and energetic during the day:* Good sleep doesn't just

matter at night; it affects your day. When you sleep well, you're more alert, focused, and mentally awake. Daily activities feel easier, you get tired less quickly, and you can concentrate better at school or during other tasks. In short, you feel more productive and less exhausted.

- *We relax and "disconnect" before going to bed:* What you do before bedtime, and even during the day, has a big impact on sleep quality. For example, sleeping during the day (long naps) can make it harder to fall asleep at night. Some habits right before bedtime can also interfere with sleep, such as:
  - eating heavy meals
  - consuming certain foods (like chocolate)
  - doing intense physical activity late in the evening
  - being exposed to bright lights for a long time
  - using your phone, TV, or other screens while already in bed

Helping your body and mind slow down before sleep creates the right conditions for falling asleep naturally.



## CHAPTER 3: What does it mean to sleep poorly?



## WHEN DO WE SLEEP POORLY?

We've already seen that adolescence is a time when sleep naturally changes. Along with the physical changes of puberty, big changes in social life, habits, stress levels, and daily routines can all affect sleep at this stage of life.

One of the main changes happens in the circadian rhythm, the body's internal clock that controls when we feel sleepy and when we feel awake. During puberty, this clock shifts. Teens naturally start to feel sleepy later at night than they did as children. This makes it harder to fall asleep early and often leads to later bedtimes.

This shift isn't a problem by itself as long as you can still wake up on time and feel rested in the morning. The problem starts when going to bed late means you don't get enough sleep on days when you need to wake up early.

Many teens try to compensate by taking naps in the afternoon. While naps may feel helpful at first, they often make it even harder to fall asleep at night, pushing bedtime even later.

### Sleep deprivation and its effects:

Research shows that many teens experience chronic sleep deprivation, which means not getting enough sleep over a long period of time. This often leads to feeling sleepy during the day and can affect:

- mood
- attention and concentration
- memory
- self-control
- school performance

Sleep deprivation usually happens on weekdays, when teens wake up early for school but go to bed late. School schedules often require teens to be alert at a time when their bodies naturally want to sleep.

To make up for lost sleep, many teens sleep much longer on weekends. While this feels good in the short term, it can confuse the body clock. As a result, falling asleep on Sunday night becomes harder, and Monday mornings feel especially exhausting.

Because of this, sleep problems during adolescence are often caused by a mix of sleep loss and misaligned sleep schedules. Over time, this can affect physical health, mental health, safety, and performance.

## WHEN DOES POOR SLEEP BECOME A LONG-TERM PROBLEM?

Everyone sleeps badly sometimes. Stressful events or even exciting ones can make it harder to fall asleep or stay asleep. Most of the time, these problems are temporary and go away on their own.

Sleep difficulties become a real problem when they last over time and start affecting health and daily life. That's why it's important to notice them early.

So how can a few bad nights turn into a long-term issue?

This can happen when three types of factors interact. This is called the *3Ps* model of insomnia:

### The *3Ps* model of insomnia.

- *Predisposing factors*: Some people are naturally more vulnerable to sleep problems. This can be linked to genetics, biology, or personality traits. For example, people who are very anxious, perfectionistic, or easily stressed may have more trouble sleeping. Not everyone with insomnia has the same traits, here's no "one type" of person who struggles with sleep.
- *Precipitating factors*: Sleep problems often start after stressful events, such as exams, conflicts, illness, or big life changes. Changes in routine or lifestyle can also trigger sleep difficulties.
- *Perpetuating (maintaining) factors*: Even when stress decreases, sleep problems sometimes continue. This doesn't mean the person can't handle stress. More often, insomnia is kept going by how someone reacts to sleep difficulties.

These maintaining factors can be:

- Behavioral (habits around sleep).
- Cognitive (thoughts and worries about sleep).
- Emotional (frustration, anxiety, fear about not sleeping).

Let's look more closely at these

## WHICH BEHAVIORS CAN HELP OR DAMAGE SLEEP?

Sleep is something we learn, therefore changing certain habits, both during the day and at night, can improve sleep.

- *Knowing the difference between sleepiness and stress.*

Sleepiness shows up as physical signs, like:

- heavy or closing eyes
- yawning
- slouching
- wanting to lie down

When you notice these signs, it's a good moment to go to bed.

Stress and fatigue feel different. They may include muscle tension, racing thoughts, or feeling restless. This means your body is still "on." In this case, going to bed too early can actually make sleep harder. It's better to relax first and wait until you truly feel sleepy.

- *Disconnecting at the end of the day.*

A regular bedtime routine helps your brain understand that sleep is coming. Simple actions like changing into pajamas or brushing your teeth can help.

The hour before bed should be dedicated to calming activities. These might include:

- reading
- listening to music
- drawing
- anything that helps you relax

What matters is not what is "supposed" to be relaxing, but what actually works for you.

Trying to force sleep doesn't work. Even relaxing activities can backfire if we do them only to "make ourselves sleep." Sleep comes naturally when we stop trying to control it.

As Viktor Frankl said:

“Sleep is like a dove that rests on your shoulder it stays there only if you don’t turn to look at it.”

- *Don’t stay in bed awake.*

Trying too hard to get enough sleep can lead to habits that make things worse, such as:

- going to bed earlier even when not sleepy
- staying in bed after waking up, hoping to feel less tired

What matters most is not just how many hours you sleep, but how continuous your sleep is.

Spending a long time awake in bed teaches your brain that the bed is a place for worrying and frustration, not sleeping.

If you can’t sleep, it’s better to get out of bed and do something calm until you feel sleepy again. If possible, use:

- the bed only for sleeping
- another spot (chair, pouf) for reading or listening to music.

- *Be regular, especially with wake-up time.*

Trying to fix sleep by sleeping in or going to bed early usually doesn’t help. Instead:

- wake up at the same time every day
- go to bed only when you feel sleepy

Keeping a consistent wake-up time, even on weekends, helps regulate your body clock and reduce daytime tiredness.

- *What you do after waking up matters too.*

Starting the day in a positive way helps shake off sleepiness. This might include:

- eating breakfast
- listening to music
- taking a warm shower
- reading

Again, what matters is what helps you feel better.

## HOW THOUGHTS AND BELIEFS AFFECT SLEEP

Thoughts about sleep strongly influence how we feel and behave. For example, if you believe, “I must sleep at least 8 hours or tomorrow will be terrible,” you may go to bed early even when you’re not sleepy. This can lead to frustration, anxiety, and difficulty falling asleep. Sleep myths increase worry and worry makes sleep harder.

### Common sleep myths

#### *“I need at least 8 hours of sleep”*

Many teens feel fine with 8 hours, some need more, some slightly less. What matters most is:

- how rested you feel
- how you function during the day

Sleep quality is just as important as sleep quantity.

#### *“I need a nap to recover”*

Naps can sometimes help, but they often make falling asleep at night harder. Ask yourself how you feel sometimes staying awake is the better choice.

#### *“Bad sleep will ruin my health”*

Occasional poor sleep is normal, especially in adolescence. Long-term sleep problems deserve attention, but they are treatable and not permanent.

#### *“I’ve lost control over my sleep”*

Trying to force sleep often makes it harder. One helpful technique is paradoxical intention—doing the opposite:

- lie in bed
- try to stay awake
- don’t check the time
- let sleep arrive on its own

#### *“I slept badly, today will be awful”*

Expecting a bad day often makes it worse. Even after poor sleep, many

people manage the day better than they expect.

*"Sleeping pills are the only solution"*

For teens, medication should be used cautiously. Research shows that psychological therapy (CBT) is the most effective treatment for insomnia, without side effects.

Learning how to manage sleep is a skill you can use for life.

## **SLEEP AND EMOTIONS**

Sleep and emotions affect each other deeply. Poor sleep can make emotions feel stronger and harder to manage. At the same time, intense emotions can make it harder to fall asleep.

Trying to suppress emotions often backfires. What helps more is accepting emotions without judging them and allowing them to pass.

Emotions naturally go up and down especially during adolescence. What matters most is being able to return to a calm state.

## **EMOTION REGULATION AND SLEEP**

Helpful strategies linked to better sleep include:

- reframing thoughts ("I can handle this")
- accepting emotions instead of fighting them
- avoiding constant emotional suppression

## **HELPING SLEEP THROUGH THE DAY**

Good sleep starts during the day:

- make time for enjoyable activities
- do demanding tasks when you feel most alert
- keep evenings lighter

*"Putting the day to bed"*

Before bedtime, it helps to:

- relax after dinner
- or write down worries and plans earlier in the evening

This keeps thoughts from taking over at night.

### *Using imagination*

Creating a calming mental story during the day can help redirect your mind at night when worries show up.

### *Final message about sleep*

Healthy sleep isn't about control, it's about balance.

That means:

- building helpful habits
- letting go of unrealistic expectations

Sleep naturally changes from day to day. Accepting this often makes it easier to sleep better again.

## CHAPTER 4: The 5 Principles of Healthy Sleep



Sleep isn't just "time off." It's a key part of your health and your everyday life. To take good care of your sleep, keep these five principles in mind:

- *Value your sleep:* it's essential for your body and mind.
- *Make sleep a priority:* plan your day in a way that supports good rest.
- *Personalize your sleep:* find what works best for you.
- *Trust your sleep:* sleep is natural and can regulate itself when conditions are right.
- *Protect your sleep:* notice what helps your sleep and what gets in the way.

## VALUE YOUR SLEEP

Good sleep is essential for feeling good both physically and mentally. Frequently disturbed sleep increases the likelihood of health concerns.

Sleep affects many important things, including your mood, appetite, energy and stress levels, capacity to focus, and overall well-being. During adolescence, sleep problems such as insomnia or not getting enough sleep are linked to difficulties with mental health, relationships, and school life.

Teens with sleep problems often report:

- more feelings of depression, anxiety, anger, or trouble paying attention,
- behavioral difficulties,
- higher use of alcohol or drugs,
- lower school performance,
- thoughts about self-harm or suicide.

They may also feel constantly tired, have low energy, feel unwell, or experience physical concerns such as headaches, stomachaches, or back pain. Studies show that lack of sleep can reduce concentration, slow thinking, and increase daytime sleepiness.

For all these reasons, taking care of your sleep is just as important as eating well and staying active.

## MAKE SLEEP A PRIORITY

One of the best ways to improve sleep is to treat it as a priority. This means organizing your day so that, after dinner, you can slow down and disconnect from schoolwork or planning. Try to spend the evening doing calm, enjoyable activities. Having a regular pre-bed routine or setting aside some time just for yourself helps your body understand that it's time to relax and get ready for sleep.

## PERSONALIZE YOUR SLEEP

Everyone is different and everyone sleeps differently. Here are some ways to find what works best for you:

- *Find your ideal schedule*, making sure it fits your daily life. Go to bed when you actually feel sleepy.
- *Discover how much sleep you need*: if you don't set an alarm and go to bed when you're tired, what time do you naturally wake up?
- *Choose relaxing evening activities* that help you unwind.
- *Find what helps you start your day well*, such as light movement, music, or a calm morning routine.

There's no single "perfect" sleep routine: only the one that works best for you.

## TRUST YOUR SLEEP

Sleep is a natural process that your body needs to survive. When the conditions are right, sleep tends to regulate itself.

The strategies in this booklet are meant to help you create those conditions. Finding the right balance takes time, patience, and some trial and error. Progress isn't always straight and smooth; here may be good nights and bad nights before things improve.

Learning to trust your sleep, supported by both science and your own experience, is a powerful step toward long-term sleep health.

## PROTECT YOUR SLEEP

When do you sleep well? And when do you sleep badly?

Paying attention to what helps or disrupts your sleep allows you to make better choices. That doesn't mean you have to follow strict rules all the time.

Does this mean you can never go to the cinema with friends because it might make it harder to fall asleep?

Of course not.

It means getting to know yourself and finding balance. Going to the cinema three nights in a row might not be ideal during the school days, but enjoying it once in a while is totally fine. Sometimes we choose fun over perfect sleep and that's okay.

One bad night doesn't mean you'll always sleep badly. Being too strict about "sleep rules" can actually make things worse. What matters is flexibility, awareness, and balance without forgetting what makes you feel good.

For example, some people find it hard to sleep after an argument in the evening. In that case, it can help to talk openly with parents or caregivers, such as:

"Can we talk about difficult topics in the morning instead? After a good night's sleep, it's easier to deal with problems."

## **WHO CAN YOU ASK FOR HELP?**

If you think you're having ongoing sleep difficulties and don't know who to talk to or how to ask for help, you can contact us at:

[c.baglioni@unimarconi.it](mailto:c.baglioni@unimarconi.it)

You'll receive information about support services and centers available near you.



# **EATING BEHAVIOR**

# CHAPTER 1: What Does It Mean to Have a "Healthy" and Balanced Diet?



## THE “GOOD FOOD VS. BAD FOOD” TRAP

When people talk about “healthy eating”, it’s often simplified into two groups:

- *“Good” foods, like fruit and vegetables*
- *“Bad” foods, like sweets or fatty foods*

It’s true that foods have different nutritional qualities, and learning about them helps us make better choices. But dividing foods into “good” and “bad” isn’t accurate from a scientific point of view, and it isn’t helpful for our health either.

Your body and brain need energy from all kinds of foods, just in different amounts. Trying to completely avoid certain foods can lead to feelings like guilt, shame, anger, or sadness. Over time, this can harm your relationship with food and your overall well-being.

## WHAT DOES IT REALLY MEAN TO BE “HEALTHY”?

Being healthy doesn’t just mean “not being sick.” Health includes physical, mental, and social well-being.

Here are some examples:

- *Physical health:* your body works well and you’re not ill.
- *Mental (psychological) health:* feeling emotionally balanced, being able to handle stress, focus, think clearly, and deal with everyday challenges.
- *Social health:* having supportive relationships and feeling connected to others.

To understand someone’s health, it’s not enough to look at their body, weight, or what they eat. It’s also important to consider how they feel emotionally and socially at that moment in their life.

These three areas of health are closely connected. If one is struggling, the others can be affected too. That’s why weight, body shape, or food choices not reliable indicators of health in isolation.

Also, many factors that affect weight and body shape are not fully under our control. For example, weight can change depending on:

- *how much water you've drunk,*
- *the time of day,*
- *digestion,*
- *hormones (such as during the menstrual cycle),*
- *medications,*
- *even weather conditions.*

## SO, WHAT IS A “HEALTHY” DIET?

Your body and brain can't work properly if they rely on only one type of food. A healthy diet is varied and balanced, and it includes all the main nutrients: carbohydrates, proteins, fats, fiber, vitamins, and minerals.

Every food group plays an important role:

- *Carbohydrates (carbs)* give energy to your brain and muscles and help keep blood sugar stable. Not eating enough carbs can cause tiredness, weakness, and irritability.
- *Protein rich foods* are essential for growth and for repairing the body. They also provide important nutrients like iron, zinc, vitamin B12, and omega-3 fatty acids.
- *Fruit and vegetables* provide vitamins, minerals, fiber, and other substances that support your immune system, digestion, and overall health.
- *Calcium* is especially important during growth. It helps build strong bones, which support your body and protect bone marrow—the part that produces blood cells.
- *Fats* are an important energy reserve. They are part of cell membranes and help your body absorb vitamins like A, D, and E.

Eating a variety of foods regularly helps your body maintain enough energy for school, sports, thinking, and everyday activities.

Energy needs vary from person to person and depend on factors like age, gender, metabolism, and physical activity. Even when you're resting, organs like your brain and heart need a lot of energy.

When your body is running low on energy, it sends signals such as:

- *hunger or stomach growling,*
- *tiredness,*
- *headaches,*
- *weakness,*
- *difficulty concentrating.*

If these signals are ignored for too long, you may suddenly feel the urge to eat a large amount of food quickly. This is your body trying to restore energy fast.

In short, a healthy diet is about balance, variety, and meeting your personal energy needs.

## **WHAT HELPS SUPPORT A HEALTHY DIET?**

Eating in a healthy way also means feeling free and flexible in your food choices. What you eat can be influenced by many things—your mood, time of day, schedule, hunger level, available food, or social situations—and that’s completely normal.

Below are some ideas to help support a balanced and realistic approach to eating.

### *Listen to Your Body*

Hunger is a natural signal that helps us survive. But it’s not the only reason we eat. Emotions and social situations also influence when, what, and how we eat.

For example:

- Feeling sad or angry might make you eat even if you’re not hungry or stop you from eating even when you are.
- Being out with friends might lead you to order dessert even if you already feel full.

Instead of judging yourself, try to notice why you’re eating with curiosity and kindness. Understanding your patterns helps you connect better with your body.

Importantly, eating in reaction to emotional or psychological hunger is

not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, eating for both those reasons can be incorporated into flexible eating patterns such as intuitive eating. The key is to treat yourself with kindness and compassion rather than shame when this happens, and to expand your toolkit so that you also have alternative ways to comfort and reward yourself

### *Eat Regular Meals*

Eating regularly helps keep your energy and blood sugar levels stable. This can reduce tiredness, irritability, and difficulty concentrating.

Regular meals also help regulate appetite. Your body naturally tries to keep its weight more or less stable, this is sometimes referred to as your “set point”. If you eat too little for a long time, your metabolism slows down to save energy. If you eat slightly more than usual, metabolism can speed up to use that energy.

When meals are very irregular, it becomes harder to recognize hunger and fullness signals, which can make eating feel confusing or out of control.

### *Avoid Overly Rigid Food Rules*

Very strict food rules often do more harm than good. When these rules are broken, people may feel frustrated or guilty. These emotions can lead to eating “comfort foods,” which temporarily make us feel better.

Afterward, guilt and shame may return creating a cycle that’s hard to break.

Your body naturally seeks balance (this is called homeostasis). Completely avoiding certain foods, especially the ones you crave can make your brain want them even more, sometimes leading to overeating.

There are also times when eating regularly is harder, like on vacation, during social events, or when eating out. At those times, it’s important to allow yourself flexibility and enjoy the experience without worrying too much about calories, weight, or rules.

## **MESSAGES TO TAKE HOME**

- *A healthy diet includes all main nutrients and meets your individual energy needs.*
- *No food is “bad” by itself—every food group has a role in keeping your body and brain working well.*
- *Healthy eating means balance, variety, and flexibility, not strict rules.*
- *Listening to your body, respecting your needs, and considering your preferences and values are all part of eating well.*

## CHAPTER 2: Warning Signs of an Unhealthy and Unbalanced Eating Pattern



## TWO CONCERNING EXTREMES: RESTRICTION AND LOSS OF CONTROL

In Chapter 1, we learned that healthy eating means:

- including all types of foods,
- eating amounts that match your energy needs,
- and choosing food flexibly, depending on the situation.

This balance helps your body get the energy it needs to work properly, while also allowing meals to be enjoyable whether that means sharing time with others or taking a break for yourself.

Sometimes, though, finding this balance becomes harder. Many factors can get in the way, and some of them will be explored in the next chapters.

When eating becomes unbalanced, it often moves toward two extremes:

- restriction and rigidity,
- loss of control and overeating.

### RESTRICTION AND RIGIDITY

Restriction means following very strict food rules. These can include:

- Cutting out entire food groups (like fats or carbohydrates),
- Eating much less than your body needs,
- Eating fixed amounts of things, or eating supplements instead of meals with natural sources of nutrients.
- Or going for long periods without eating (for example, for 8 hours or more). However, this is only considered a restriction if it is done for weight/shape purposes, and not for religious purposes or due to an occasionally busy schedule.

At first, restriction might feel like a way to “stay in control,” but over time, it can seriously affect both physical and mental health. Remember that adolescents are still growing, and they may need to eat more frequently than some adults.

Rigid eating patterns may provide sufficient nutrition but can be a sign of an eating concern when deviating from the plan causes distress or

when going hungry seems like a better option than eating something that isn't part of your "plan."

## **LOSS OF CONTROL AND OVEREATING**

Loss of control refers to episodes where a person eats a much larger amount of food than most people would eat in the same situation.

During these episodes, people often feel:

- unable to stop eating,
- unable to control what or how much they eat,
- intense guilt, shame, or regret afterward.

Sometimes people may eat more than they are hungry for without losing control but with the goal of influencing their weight. When this occurs within cycles of trying to put on mass, and then lose fat, this also represents a harmful pattern.

## **WHY THESE EXTREMES ARE A PROBLEM**

Both restriction and loss of control, as well as other cycles of extreme eating behaviors, can lead to big changes in body weight, in either direction.

But eating behaviors don't just affect the body; they also affect the mind and relationships.

Big changes in eating patterns can lead to:

- difficulty concentrating or remembering things,
- feeling more anxious, sad, or angry,
- being more irritable with others,
- pulling away from friends or family.

## **HOW LOSS OF CONTROL CAN DEVELOP**

During adolescence, emotions can feel very intense and sometimes overwhelming like anger, sadness, stress, or boredom.

For some people, food becomes a way to cope with these feelings. Eating "comfort foods" (often sweet or high-calorie foods) can

give temporary relief. Wanting a favorite snack after a hard day, or celebrating something with food, is normal. Problem occur when food becomes the main or only way to deal with emotions.

For example:

- Eating a whole pack of cookies might briefly reduce boredom or sadness.
- But soon after, guilt or shame may appear.
- Then the difficult emotions might return come back, sometimes even stronger than initially.

This can turn into a cycle:

- Strong emotion I can't manage
- I eat impulsively and lose control
- I feel brief relief
- Guilt and shame appear
- The original emotion returns

This cycle looks different for everyone. Weight and body shape don't always change in the same way, because they depend on many factors, not just how much someone eats.

However, frequently eating large amounts of food in an irregular way can:

- disrupt signals of hunger and fullness,
- cause blood sugar instability,
- affect menstrual cycles (in people who menstruate).

Psychologically, people may experience:

- anxiety and tension,
- harsh self-criticism,
- shame, guilt, or disgust toward themselves.

They may also struggle with:

- low motivation,
- poor concentration,
- neglecting self-care,
- avoiding school, work, or social activities.

## HOW RESTRICTION CAN DEVELOP

Restriction, like loss of control, can start as an attempt to manage difficult emotions or stressful situations, or an attempt to modify appearance.

At first, restriction may:

- create a sense of control,
- reduce anxiety for a short time,
- even feel “rewarding.”

But this doesn’t last.

Your brain needs a lot of energy to function *about 20–25% of the body’s total energy*, even at rest. When the brain doesn’t get enough fuel, it struggles.

A poorly nourished brain can feel:

- “foggy,”
- slow,
- rigid.

This can lead to:

- difficulty learning and remembering,
- trouble concentrating,
- black-and-white thinking,
- low tolerance for mistakes or changes.

It also becomes harder to:

- understand your own emotions,
- read other people’s emotions,
- communicate clearly with people close to you.

As a result, people may isolate themselves not because they want to, but because they don’t have enough energy to cope socially. Physically, long-term restriction can cause:

- weight loss,
- dizziness,
- digestive problems,

- loss of menstrual cycle (in people who menstruate),
- weaker bones, hair, and nails,
- feeling cold all the time
- increased likelihood of injury.

You can think of it as the brain switching into "*energy-saving mode*":

- reduced food intake
- rigid thinking
- less flexibility
- difficulty coping

### **AN IMPORTANT MESSAGE**

Even though restriction and loss of control often start as ways to deal with stress, emotions, or problems at school or with others, or attempts to change appearance, *they are never real solutions*.

Instead, they create more problems and over time, those problems feed into each other.

So what can help?

The simplest and most important step is:

*talk to a trusted adult and ask for help.*

There is *nothing to be ashamed of*.

Everyone goes through hard times.

What matters is not facing them alone.

### **MESSAGES TO TAKE HOME**

- *Restriction and loss of control are two extremes of unhealthy eating patterns.*
- *They are often signs of deeper emotional distress.*
- *They can affect physical health, mental health, and relationships.*
- *Asking for help from a trusted adult is a powerful and important first step.*

## CHAPTER 3: Body Image and “Body Functionality”



## WHAT IS BODY IMAGE?

*Body image* is how you perceive, think about, and feel about your body. It's not just what you see in the mirror it's a mental picture that includes thoughts and emotions, too. Body image has three main parts:

- *Perception*: This is how you see your body its size, shape, and features. Sometimes this perception doesn't match reality. For example, someone may feel "big" or "overweight" even when they are actually very thin.
- *Thoughts (cognitive aspects)*: These are the ideas and beliefs you have about your body. For example: "If I were thinner or more muscular, people would like me more." The problem with these thoughts is that they often lead to constant dissatisfaction no change in your appearance ever feels "good enough."
- *Feelings (emotional aspects)*: This is how you feel about your body whether you feel comfortable, proud, embarrassed, or unhappy with how you look..

## BODY DISSATISFACTION AND SELF-ESTEEM

Body image and self-esteem strongly interact. When someone feels unhappy with their body, they may experience shame, anxiety, sadness, or anger about their appearance. Over time, this can damage how they see themselves as a person.

Research shows that:

- about *4 out of 10 teens* are unhappy with their body,
- and in some studies, *8 out of 10 adolescents* said they wished their body were different.
- Body dissatisfaction is linked to:
  - lower self-esteem,
  - higher risk of eating disorders,
  - depressive symptoms,
  - difficulties in friendships and relationships.

That's why learning to build a healthier relationship with your body is so important.

## WHY ARE SO MANY PEOPLE UNHAPPY WITH THEIR BODIES?

There are many reasons why body dissatisfaction is so common. Some come from society and culture, and others from personal experiences.

### *Unrealistic beauty ideals*

We live in a culture that strongly celebrates thin and highly athletic bodies. Over time, people may start believing that this is the only acceptable body type. When someone compares their real body to this unrealistic ideal, dissatisfaction can increase, even though that ideal is often impossible to reach.

### *Media and social media*

Social media shows mostly “perfect” bodies and happy moments. Filters, editing, and carefully chosen photos hide imperfections and real-life struggles. Seeing these images every day can make people feel like they’re not good enough, even when what they see isn’t realistic.

### *Feeling “responsible” for body shape*

Our culture often sends the message that if you work hard enough, eat “right,” or exercise more, you can get any body you want. When that doesn’t happen, people may feel guilty or like they’ve failed.

The truth is that body shape and weight are strongly influenced by genetics and biology, both of which are things we have little control over. A much healthier goal is taking care of your body, not trying to force it to look a certain way.

### *Negative comments and body shaming*

Teasing or critical comments about weight, food, or appearance can be deeply hurtful. Over time, they can lead to shame, insecurity, and growing dissatisfaction with one’s body. Words matter more than we sometimes realize.

### *“Toxic” environments*

Some environments have a very strong emphasis on appearance and body/weight control, including certain sports or performance settings (e.g., classical ballet, weight-based sports). When people are judged,

criticized, or encouraged to adopt extreme diets, their mental and physical well-being can suffer. Being in these environments can severely harm body image.

## **BODY FUNCTIONALITY: A DIFFERENT WAY TO LOOK AT YOUR BODY**

Having a positive body image helps protect mental health and lowers the risk of eating problems. One helpful approach is called *body functionality*. Instead of focusing on how your body looks, body functionality focuses on what your body does.

Your body allows you to:

- move (walk, run, swim),
- breathe and digest food,
- see, hear, touch, and feel,
- create (dance, draw, play music),
- communicate (smile, hug, use body language),
- take care of yourself (shower, rest, heal).

These abilities are easy to forget until something goes wrong. When you're sick or injured, you suddenly notice how much your body normally does for you every day.

Research shows that focusing on body functionality:

- improves body image,
- increases self-acceptance,
- reduces the negative impact of social media.

## **TRY THIS EXERCISE**

Take a moment and think about *things you appreciate about yourself or your body*. They don't have to be about appearance.

If it feels hard at first, that's normal. This is a skill and like any skill, it gets easier with practice. The more you shift your attention from what you dislike to what you value, the more natural it becomes.



## **MESSAGES TO TAKE HOME**

- *Feeling unhappy with your body is common during adolescence, but it can affect self-esteem and well-being.*
- *Body dissatisfaction is influenced by culture, media, and personal experiences like teasing.*
- *The “perfect body” doesn’t exist—bodies naturally come in many shapes and sizes.*
- *Focusing on body functionality what your body allows you to do can help you develop a kinder, healthier relationship with your body.*

## CHAPTER 4: Unhelpful myths about eating disorders and how to ask for help



## FALSE MYTHS ABOUT EATING DISORDERS

Eating disorders are characterized by unhealthy eating behaviors, such as restriction or loss of control, and by intense concerns about weight, body shape, and physical appearance.

Excessive focus on these aspects can negatively affect everyday life, to the point of avoiding an increasing number of environments, situations, and people, and making life much smaller.

As described in the previous sections, these behaviors and thoughts are often underpinned by a deep distress, characterized by negative emotions that are difficult to manage. Focusing on the body and eating may appear to be a way to (re)establish an (illusory) sense of control over these emotions or over painful and unpredictable events. However, this is unsustainable over time, and ultimately leads to more distress.

Experiencing an eating disorder, and more generally difficulties with one's body or eating, is more common than is often believed. However, unfortunately, asking for help with these problems happens less often than needed.

Sometimes it is difficult to realize that what one is doing has become harmful to one's health. This may in part be because the images, videos, and messages that surround us lead us to believe that controlling physical appearance, especially weight and body shape, is the solution to emotional difficulties, relationship issues, and general negative feelings.

In many cases, it is difficult to understand that these behaviors and concerns are signs of a deep distress, and therefore to realize that it is necessary to ask for help. In other cases, the barrier to self-seeking might be fear that the person listening may react negatively or be judgmental

The stigma related to psychological difficulties can also increase fears that disclosing concerns will be interpreted as attention seeking, or a lack of willpower.

These are, however, *false beliefs*, and there is no evidence to support them.

It is important to dismantle these false myths and better understand what eating disorders look like. Having clear information is an important step towards taking care of oneself and of others.

**Below are some examples of false myths that often accompany eating disorders:**

***"An eating disorder is just attention-seeking"***

Eating disorders are real illnesses with substantial impact on physical and psychological health. These problems require care from an interdisciplinary team that includes psychologists, psychiatrists, nutritionists, and medical doctors.

Recovery from eating disorders is always possible. However, to do so it is important to ask for help as soon as possible.

***"Eating disorders only affect females"***

It is true that eating disorders are more frequently diagnosed in female adolescents. However, they can affect people of all ages, genders, and ethnic backgrounds.

Eating disorders may look different among different groups. However, they tend to be characterized by dysfunctional eating behaviors and an intense focus on controlling weight and shape that negatively affects important life areas (school, friends, family relationships, etc.)

***"People who have an eating disorder are very thin"***

Less than 6% of people who suffer from an eating disorder are underweight. Having a "normal" weight is not a guarantee of well-being.

Although weight perception is often considered to be an important part of eating disorder concerns, it is important to note that in most cases eating disorders develop due to complex personal histories and risk factors.

***"You just need to eat more/less!"***

Unfortunately, recovery is not something you can just "want hard enough". It requires the help of trained professionals and support from friends and family.

As with physical illnesses, recovering from an eating disorder requires care and attention, and only trained professionals can provide appropriate support. It is only important to know that there close friends and family you can rely on. are very important.

Without treatment, recovery is more difficult. Starting a therapeutic journey early predicts a greater likelihood of recovery, in a shorter amount of time.

## **WHAT SHOULD YOU DO IF YOU THINK YOU ARE EXPERIENCING EATING DIFFICULTIES?**

Eating disorders are real illnesses and, like all illnesses, they require appropriate treatment. The steps towards getting help for eating disorders include:

- *Talking to trusted adults:* talking with adults you care about and trust can be very difficult. However, especially if you are under 18, having the support of trusted adults such as parents, grandparents, aunts or uncles, or teachers is essential for accessing treatment and for supporting you towards recovery over time.
- *Identifying specialized treatment centers:* eating disorder care often requires specialized centers that include complementary professionals (psychologists, psychiatrists, internal medicine doctors, dietitians). Your general practitioner can help identify the closest center.
- *Making an appointment!*

## **WHAT SHOULD YOU DO IF YOU SUSPECT THAT A LOVED ONE IS EXPERIENCING AN EATING DISORDER?**

Helping a person with eating disorders can be difficult, and it is important not to become too intrusive. Below are some suggestions for providing support:

- *Avoid focusing the conversation on food, weight, or physical exercise:* for people with eating disorders, talking about food and the body is unhelpful and often counterproductive, because whatever you say is unlikely to reassure them.

- *Show curiosity and interest in thoughts and emotions*: it is important to ask the other person what kinds of thoughts and emotions they are experiencing, from a broader perspective than their eating patterns (e.g., “What are you thinking about?” “What emotions are you feeling right now?”).
- *Offer help*: being close to someone who is struggling is not easy, but for them, knowing they are not alone can be a strong motivating factor towards recovery. It is important to offer help in moments of need, asking open questions and not assuming that one already knows what the other person needs (e.g., “What can I do to help you in this difficult moment?”).
- *Help increase awareness of the problem*: it is helpful to share one’s perspective on what has been observed, without making the other person feel judged or guilty (e.g., “In the last few weeks you seem sadder...”)

## WHO CAN HELP?

As described, eating disorders are real illnesses and require appropriate treatment. There are many specialized centers for the treatment of eating disorders, but it is not always easy to understand how to proceed or who to contact.

If you think you may be experiencing any of the things described here, but do not know who to turn to or how to ask for help, you can see the website of the Academy of Eating Disorders (AED) in which a helpful list of resources at local level or via the internet is provided: <https://www.aedweb.org/aedold/resources/resources/relevant-websites>.

Alternatively, you may contact us at the following address:

[valentina.cardi@unipd.it](mailto:valentina.cardi@unipd.it)

You will be provided with more detailed information about services and centers closest to you

## **MESSAGES TO TAKE HOME**

- *There are many false beliefs about eating disorders. It is important to remember that these disorders are real illnesses, that can affect anyone, and require specialized treatment as soon as possible.*
- *If you think you may be experiencing this type of disorder, remember that recovery is always possible, but it is very important to ask for help promptly!*

