

THE EATING DISORDER (ED): UNDERSTANDING YOUR COMPULSIVE OVEREATING

Compulsive overeating, your Eating Disorder (ED), has probably been with you for a long time and has been useful in helping you cope with your feelings and life situations. Your Eating Disorder (ED) has become a part of who you are. ED is familiar to you. Any behaviors that help to maintain your Eating Disorder, or keep ED active, may feel calming to you. In other words, maintaining your Eating Disorder means you will not have to make changes. This sameness feels safe and reduces anxiety. Eating-Disorder behaviors, such as overeating, hiding food, or eating secretly, are familiar to you. The urge to engage in these familiar behaviors is powerful. On the other hand, when you engage in behaviors that indicate that you are giving up your Eating Disorder, you may feel frightened. These more healthy behaviors are behaviors such as consuming fewer calories, taking smaller portions of food, eating a normal amount of food even when you feel emotionally overwhelmed, or eating foods with a lower fat content. When you engage in any of these behaviors, which indicate that you are giving up your compulsive overeating you may feel anxious or frightened. These more healthy behaviors will be hard to do. When you engage in more healthy eating behaviors, you may feel like you are falling apart, losing your identity, or being abandoned. At this time, Eating-Disorder behaviors may seem like the only secure thing in your life. ED may seem like a friend, a teddy bear, a security blanket, and an anchor all rolled into one. Letting go of ED is difficult. Letting go of ED, your compulsive overeating, will happen when you make a decision to become more healthy, physically and emotionally. This will be a courageous decision to believe in yourself and to go for it. As you let go of ED behaviors, you will begin to depend more often on other people, other things, and other aspects of yourself. Relying on other people for support is difficult because people are imperfect. Other people are just human, and they won't always be there for you like ED behaviors. Using other things for support and to help you cope with life situations may also be frustrating. Other things (such as hobbies, work, exercise, sports, music, art, prayer, and meditation) are not going to be a quick fix like Eating-Disorder behaviors. Initially, these other coping methods are not going to work as well as ED behaviors. Using other aspects of yourself to cope with feelings will likely be the hardest change of all. This behavior involves becoming aware that you can cope, calm yourself, and be strong without using something outside of yourself to accomplish these feats. You will develop an awareness that you are strong and somewhat independent. You will begin to recognize that you are calming yourself and acting responsibly by using resources within yourself; rather than by being dependent on other things or other people. This awareness is both frightening and exciting. When you let go of ED, your Eating Disorder, you will be learning to meet your needs for security, warmth, safety, and love in many new ways. Like any new situation, the learning of these behaviors will involve taking risks, experiencing setbacks, being disappointed, and having relapses, as well as enjoying feelings of accomplishment and excitement. The more you use your new strengths, your new coping behaviors, and your network of support people (however imperfect and human), the easier it will be to let go of ED. The bonus that comes when you let go of your Eating-Disorder behaviors is that you will be able to let go of other things in your life that have become destructive to you. You will find it easier to travel

though life, letting go of unhealthy behaviors and situations, and even steering clear of them. You will be starting a pattern of healthy life behaviors. Like any loss, the letting go of ED, your Eating Disorder, will hurt. You will need time to heal. You may feel insecure and anxious at first. You will recognize many new emotions in your-self because your Eating-Disorder behaviors will no longer be helping to cover up your feelings. There are many things in life to which people become addicted. Compulsive-overeating behaviors are only one type of addiction. These behaviors are attempts to help us cope with emotions and life difficulties. Because you have lived with your Eating Disorder (ED), have recognized the destructiveness of ED behaviors, and have let go of ED, you will be more understanding of yourself and others. People are not so different.

Reproduced from: Innovations in Clinical Practice: A Source Book (Vol. 17) pp. 499-501, by L. VandeCreek and T.L.Jackson (Eds.), Sarasota, FL: Professional Resource Press. Copyright © 1999 by the Professional Resource Exchange, Inc., P.O. Box 15560, Sarasota, FL 34277-1560.