

Real Issues

8 Keys to Recovery From an Eating Disorder
by Carolyn Costin & Gwen Schubert Grabb

Poor Self-Esteem:

- I'm afraid of myself and of being out of control
- I'm not worthy
- People don't like me
- I can't trust my own judgments or make decisions

Need for Distraction:

- When I'm bingeing or throwing up, I don't think about anything else
- I need something that distracts me from my thoughts and feelings
- Worrying about my weight keeps me from worrying about other things

Fill Up Emptiness:

- Something is missing in my life and I try to fill it with my eating disorder (E.D.)
- I feel empty inside and bingeing takes me away from that temporarily
- Eating fills up my emptiness
- All my E.D. rituals help me fill up a void in my life

Belief in a Myth:

- I will be happy and successful if I am thin
- Thinner people are happier
- I have to be thin to be attractive and desirable
- Losing weight will solve my problems

Drive for Perfection:

- I have to be the best at everything, whether it is taking a test or dieting
- I have the willpower to do things others can't do
- I'm either fat or thin, perfect or a failure

High-Achievement Oriented:

- I feel constant internal pressure to achieve
- I can only achieve a good body through my E.D.
- I am driven everywhere else and use my bulimia as a release
- Restricting is a real achievement, mind over matter, literally

In the context of Gender Dysphoria

It is important to identify any bullying, harassment or prejudice that the client is experiencing, as well as look at cultural hate speech and oppression. Hold a lens of cultural trauma.

Validate the importance of distraction to provide a mental break from emotional distress. This coping skill is here for a reason, so work with the client to incorporate distraction skills that could replace the eating disorder and still provide relief.

The void could be the incongruence between what the person knows about their gender and how society perceives them. Or it could be from an inability to experience their authentic self because of negative societal narratives about gender.

Recognize that acceptance equals safety and your client may be seeking safety more than happiness initially. Look at societal expectations of what it means to be a successful "man" or a "woman" and how these myths might be present.

Perfection might be a type of protection or a way to be "good" for others to secure love. It could also be a compensation for having being told they are imperfect.

Your client might feel pressured by cisnormative ideals of what a body looks like. Explore cis-sexism and what having a "good" body means. Aim to expand beyond the binary and stereotypes. Achievement might also be to secure approval from family, work or in other social settings.

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Desire to be Special/Unique:

- I get a lot of attention for my willpower over food
- I don't know who I would be without my E.D.
- My E.D. causes others to worry about me and take care of me
- My E.D. makes me stand out and be different

Need to be in Control:

- I must be in control of my body, and what goes in and out of it
- My E.D. helps me feel in control of my "out of control-ness"
- My E.D. behaviors keep my feelings under control
- My E.D. is the one thing no one has control over but me

Wants Power over Self/Others/Family/Life:

- My E.D. gives me power over my body
- I feel powerless most of the time, except when it comes to my E.D.
- My E.D. gives me power over others
- It's powerful to be able to resist food

Wants Respect and Admiration:

- I finally got respect from my peers when I lost weight
- I wanted to be admired and tried restricting to lose weight, but I couldn't do it, so I had to throw up
- When I binge I am rebelling because I know I will never get the respect and admiration that people get for being thin
- People respect my ability to resist food

Has a Hard Time Expressing Feelings:

- I don't know how to express my anger, so I binge and purge
- I feel like I swallow my feelings when I binge
- I can't deal with conflict or confrontation so I resort to my eating disorder
- Restricting helps me shut down and deny my feelings

In the context of Gender Dysphoria

The ED might be the only kind of pain others are willing or ready to see. Or it might be a way of moving attention and/or focus off of gender. Validate that all people need attention and to be cared for, and explore the barriers to receiving care in other ways.

Your client might not be able to control hormones, or may not have access to gender confirming surgeries. Changing their body through an ED may seem like the only option.

Your client may feel betrayed by their body or betrayed by society. These could both lead to a sense of powerlessness. The ED might be a "voice" to express pain when feeling unseen and marginalized.

In both the cis and trans communities there is pressure to look a certain way. Your client may be holding a belief that they need to "pass" for cis, or that they might not be trans enough. Explore the rigid social expectations for performance of gender. Expand awareness of what it means to be a man, woman or person through cross-cultural awareness.*

The ED could be emotion regulation for the anxiety, depression, rage, and grief that often accompany gender dysphoria. These feelings could be towards society or towards self.

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“Safe Place to Go”/Doesn’t Have Coping Skills:

- My E.D. is a “special world” created to keep all the “bad” out
- If I follow my own imposed rules, it helps me feel safe
- My E.D. helps me get taken care of without asking for help
- My E.D. has helped me avoid taking on adult responsibilities

Lack of Trust in Self and Others:

- I don’t trust people so I isolate from them with my E.D.
- I don’t trust anybody; I use my E.D. as my best friend
- I can never make a decision; bingeing and purging provides procrastination
- It’s easier to just follow my E.D. rules than to trust myself or anyone else

Terrified of Not Measuring Up:

- I know I can’t compete, so I let my eating disorder take me out of the running
- I won’t have anything if I don’t have my eating disorder
- I’m constantly comparing myself to everyone
- I am terrified of being fat
- I am terrified of being deprived

In the context of Gender Dysphoria

It is important to recognize that society is not safe. Gender diverse folks are subject to bullying, sexual harassment, hate speech, assault and murder. Changing their body may be your client’s way of hiding their identity to increase safety. Help problem solves ways to increase safety and connect them with resources. Be an advocate and a therapist.

Mistrust may be a symptom of cultural trauma. Validate the experiences that led to mistrust and self-doubt. Work with your client to rebuild self-trust and re-establish a method for distinguishing between what can, and cannot, be trusted.

Your client may be comparing themselves to cisgender people and holding the belief that they will never look like that. Validate their gender identity (you are a woman) and then explore their gender presentation (how do you want to walk in the world?). Explore permanent and non-permanent effects of hormones.