When food becomes your enemy

Eating disorders are illnesses that are characterised by irregular eating habits and severe distress or anxiety about food consumption, body weight and shape. Eating disturbances may include inadequate or excessive food intake, which ultimately could damage a person’s health and well-being. The most common forms of eating disorders include anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, compulsive overeating disorder and binge eating disorder and affect both females and males alike.

Eating disorders can develop during any life stage but in general appear during the teenage years or young adulthood. Classified as a medical illness, appropriate treatment is of the utmost importance for any eating disorder. Although these conditions are treatable, the symptoms and consequences can be detrimental and deadly if not addressed.

Eating disorders defined
Below is a short description of what the four most common eating disorders entail:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anorexia nervosa</th>
<th>Bulimia nervosa</th>
<th>Compulsive eating disorder</th>
<th>Binge eating disorder</th>
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<tr>
<td>Anorexia nervosa is self-imposed starvation. The male or female suffering from anorexia nervosa will typically have an obsessive fear of gaining weight, refusal to maintain a healthy body weight, and an unrealistic perception of body image. Many people with anorexia nervosa will fiercely limit the quantity of food they consume and view themselves as overweight, even when they are clearly underweight. Anorexia can have damaging health effects, such as brain damage, multi-organ failure, bone loss, heart difficulties and infertility. The risk of death is highest in individuals with this disease.</td>
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<td>This eating disorder is characterised by repeated binge eating followed by behaviours that compensate for the overeating, such as forced vomiting, excessive exercise, or extreme use of laxatives or diuretics. Men and women who suffer from bulimia may fear weight gain and feel severely unhappy with their body size and shape. The binge-eating and purging cycle is typically done in secret, creating feelings of shame, guilt and lack of control. Bulimia can have injuring effects such as gastrointestinal problems, severe hydration and heart difficulties resulting from an electrolyte imbalance.</td>
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<td>Compulsive overeating can affect women and men, though it is more prevalent in women. People with compulsive overeating disorder suffer from episodes of uncontrolled eating or bingeing, followed by periods of guilt and depression. Compulsive overeating entails the consumption of large amounts of food, sometimes accompanied by a pressured, “frenzied” feeling. Compulsive overeating disorder may cause a person to continue eating even after they are uncomfortably full.</td>
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<td>Individuals who suffer from binge eating disorder will frequently lose control over their eating. It is different from bulimia nervosa in that episodes of binging are not followed by compensatory behaviours, such as purging, fasting, or excessive exercise. Because of this, many people suffering from binge-eating disorders may become obese and at an increased risk of developing other health conditions such as cardiovascular disease. Men and women who struggle with this disorder may also experience intense feelings of guilt, distress and embarrassment related to their binge eating, which could influence further progression of the eating disorder.</td>
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Disordered eating
Disordered eating is a disturbed and unhealthy eating pattern that can include restrictive dieting, compulsive eating or skipping meals. Disordered eating behaviours, and in particular dieting, are the most common indicators of the development of an eating disorder. Disordered eating can have a destructive impact on a person’s life and has been linked to a reduced ability to cope with stressful situations.

Other examples of disordered eating include:
• Fast ing or chronic restrained eating
• Binge eating
• Self-induced vomiting
• Unbalanced eating (e.g. restricting a major food group such as fats or carbohydrates)
• Misuse of laxatives, diuretics and enemas
• Use of steroids and creatine – supplements designed to enhance athletic performance and alter physical appearance
• Use of diet pills

Preventing disordered eating
Dieting is the number one cause of the onset of an eating disorder and seeking help early is the best preventative measure. It is possible to change eating behaviour, even if you have been engaging in disordered eating and dieting for many years. With the right support and treatment and a high level of personal commitment, your body can learn to function to its full capacity again.

Eating right and enjoying food should not be difficult or a dreaded daily practice. It should empower you as an individual, energise and sustain you, and assist you in being healthier and enjoying a more balanced lifestyle.