

The step-by-step guide to:

Telling Someone You Have Bulimia

"Telling someone you have bulimia is never easy but it can be the first big step to recovery for many of us.

Hopefully this little guide will give you the motivation and support you need to take that all-important step.

Too many us live with our secret for too long! Use this guide to get you started on the road to recovery.

Also, feel free to share this booklet with anyone who might find it useful."

Yours in recovery,

Richard Kerr

♥ Ali

www.bulimiahelp.org



Ali & Richard Kerr
Bulimiahelp.org founders

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Action Plan: Step 1

Decide if you want to tell someone you have bulimia

Telling someone that you have bulimia is not an easy thing to do. It can bring up a lot of fears and anxieties. On top of that the person you decide to tell may have a difficult time understanding.

But, there is one BIG reason why telling someone you have bulimia is a good idea:

It tends to make recovery a LOT easier!

So how does telling someone I have bulimia make recovery easier?

You've probably heard the saying "a problem shared is a problem halved" right? Well there tends to be a lot of truth in that. Just talking to someone about what you're going through, regardless of whether they "get it" straight away, really can help you to remove a lot of that recovery pressure.

But there are lots of other nice benefits too such as gaining additional acceptance and support from your loved one, knowing that someone cares for you and will be there when you need them and best of all - no longer needing to hide your bulimia. Telling someone that you have bulimia means you can finally start being true to yourself.

“What can I really gain by telling someone that I have bulimia?”

- ✓ Additional real-life and real-time support.
- ✓ The opportunity to break free from the isolation that living with bulimia causes.
- ✓ New respect, understanding, love and acceptance for yourself and others.
- ✓ The opportunity to re-affirm and strengthen relationships.
- ✓ The chance to squash irrational fears that tell you people can only love you if you're perfect.
- ✓ Inner strength – when you talk about bulimia it loses a lot of its “power” over you. Talking about bulimia means you are taking the power back.
- ✓ A deeper commitment to recovery.
- ✓ Empowerment for recovery.
- ✓ A real life support network of people who can start to understand your support and recovery needs.

Not sure if telling someone is really right for you?

Let's take a look at some great insights and experiences on the subject of “telling someone” from other Bulimia Help members:

“My best friend has always been a strong male figure in my life and I opened up to him. I was simply honest and open about it, and said to him I'm sick - I've been sick for a while. He knew nothing about eating disorders, but he loved me so much as a friend and was so touched and supportive. I found this to be really helpful as I could call or email him when I was fragile. It was very therapeutic to get my thoughts out there. Once you face up to the bulimia it seems to weaken under the light of awareness.” (Bulimia Help Member, 2010)

“While you keep bulimia as your secret and your shame recovery will always be harder on you than it has to be. No matter how people react, in the end, the fact that you have faced one of your biggest challenges and made it through the other end stronger than ever helps you to develop an even better understanding of the real meaning of recovery and healing.” (Bulimia Help Member, 2011)

“I think that for a lot of people it is a very private experience, I only have one person in my life who knows about my ED history apart from my doctor. It's really a personal decision but if you have someone in your life who you can trust it can be really helpful to have someone to support you like that.” (Bulimia Help Member, 2010)

“While no one can walk the pathway to wellness for you, it is important to remind yourself that you do not have to walk this path alone. Support and understanding from those around us can be a powerful tool in recovery, especially because living with an eating disorder can be so isolating.” (Bulimia Help Member, 2009)

“I couldn't believe how many people started to share their own experiences of eating disorder with me once I came out of my bulimia closet!” (Bulimia Help Member, 2011).

“It was hard telling others but the benefits do outweigh everything else” (Bulimia Help Member, 2011)

“My boyfriend didn't understand at first, I guess it takes time for something like that to sink in. After calming down from his initial reaction I've really found him to be instrumental in my recovery. I don't even think I could have done it without his support now.” (Bulimia Help Member, 2011)

“I lived in silence for over ten years. I never even thought about telling someone because I just knew I didn't have the strength to do it, I was just too afraid. Turns out I was wrong, I was strong enough to stand up to that fear. Once I learned how much bulimia really does love secrecy I decided I had to tell people. It was very hard, but I did it and I feel 100% better for it now.” (Bulimia Help Member, 2011)

Action Plan: Step 2

Understand your own fears

Of course even when you can see all of the potential benefits of telling someone you may often still find yourself paralyzed by fears...

The “what if’s” can cause so much anxiety that they can stop you from progressing in recovery and you may simply find yourself too afraid to take this very important step.

Identifying the main causes for your fear can help you to address those issues head on.

Below you will find some of the main concerns that people tend to have when they are thinking about talking to loved ones about bulimia. See which of the fears you identify with and don’t worry if it’s more than one or two.

It’s perfectly normal to feel this way after keeping bulimia a secret for so long.

The information in the red boxes can help you to start challenging those thoughts by helping you to consider things from a different, more logical perspective.

Fear 1: “Bulimia has always been my biggest secret, I find it difficult to face up to”

Realise that HONESTY is one of the most important things in recovery. It is important to not only start being honest with yourself but also with your loved ones.

Telling someone that you have bulimia helps you to break away from these self made rules. When your bulimia is no longer a secret it loses a lot of its power and control. Telling someone you have bulimia is a huge step towards reclaiming power and control over your own life.

Fear 2: “I don’t think I need extra help, my bulimia is not *that* bad”

Bulimia is not something to take lightly; you need all the help and support you can get. Realise that when you have bulimia you are never really in control, bulimia is always in control of you. Think about it, if you were truly in control would you really put yourself through all of this pain, suffering, guilt and unhappiness?

Fear 3: “I feel so ashamed. I don’t deserve their support because I did this to myself”

Realise that having bulimia is nothing to be ashamed of because having bulimia is NOT your fault. You did NOT choose to have bulimia, but you DID choose to seek recovery. It’s hard to take action when you feel very low self esteem and worth but know that as you progress in recovery you will start to feel deserving of others love and support.

Fear 4: “Telling someone I have bulimia will expose all of my vulnerabilities”

Realise that a big chunk of recovery is about embracing that vulnerability. Accepting that no one is perfect and knowing that it is okay to turn to your loved ones for support. Remember that real relationships are about sharing all of the ups and downs, not just sugar coating everything. Recovery is about learning to show the real you that hides behind the mask. It is about turning false

smiles into real happiness. By sharing your vulnerabilities with others you can lighten the load on yourself. Recovery is hard but there is no need to go it alone.

Fear 5: “They’ll know I’ve been living a lie”

To show people the real you is a big step. You may worry that your relationships will change permanently and that people will never look at you the same way again. You may fear disappointing others or letting them down. Realise that by sharing your true self you will have the power to build unimaginably strong and supportive relationships with others. Realise that you fear exposure so much because bulimia has taken away your confidence and self esteem. It’s true that letting others in could change your relationships but it doesn’t mean that they will change in negative ways. When your loved one begins to learn more about what it’s like to live with bulimia they will understand it was not about lying.

Fear 5: “What if I become a burden?”

Try to think of things from the opposite perspective. If your loved one came to you with a problem and asked for your support, despite all of your personal struggles right now, wouldn’t you be willing to be there for them? There is no reason why the person you trust to tell that you have bulimia would feel any differently. Relationships are all about being there in times of need and joy.

Fear 6: “What if they trivialize my struggle or don’t even believe me?”

You may be terrified that they will laugh in your face or even just ignore what you are saying. One of the biggest problems you may face is that people can't comprehend that you're really sick because they don't understand the true nature of bulimia and its symptoms.

Understand that over time you can help your loved one to see that bulimia is not about being very underweight. You have the power to educate them on the realities of bulimia. Also understand that people will sometimes attempt to trivialise the situation – not because they don't care but because it would hurt them too much to admit the truth. Give them time.

Fear 7: “What if they try to force me into recovery?”

Many people are terrified that their loved ones will try to force them to recover too fast or put too much pressure on them. You may also fear that they will think they know what's best and try to impose unrealistic rules on your recovery.

Understand that talking to someone about your bulimia does not just mean having one conversation. It is a gradual process where you will have many conversations. It is very important for you to communicate and help your loved one to understand the reality of bulimia and bulimia recovery. Don't worry if they act like they know how to “cure” you at first, with the right guidance and information they can really start to understand the best ways to support you.

Fear 8: “What if they react in a hurtful way?”

It's true that often people can be very shocked when you first tell them that you have bulimia. They can feel many emotions but are most likely to react in ways that we deem as hurtful if they are upset and confused by the news. It is important to remember that initial reactions are not a reaction to you as a person.

In reality you could go on forever worrying about how someone will react. Always rehearsing and agonising over the “worst case scenarios” in your head. But you could also spend an equal amount of time trying to “talk yourself down” or rationalising your fears only for new ones to pop up.

The truth is that you can never know for sure how people will react to the news that you have bulimia until you take the plunge and tell them.

You may find yourself constantly planning for the worst reaction possible when the reality of talking to your loved one about your struggle with bulimia could be **very different.**

At this stage you need to accept that it is very normal to feel this way. Telling someone is a BIG challenge. But it is so important to not let those fears hold you back from recovery.

Remember this has nothing to do with trying to outsmart your fears. You can't always beat them, but you **CAN** always stand up to them. You do not need to let those fears rule your life anymore. It's time to take that power back. **Accept that there will be fears and do it anyway!**

Action Plan: Step 3

Figure out who you should tell

When you are preparing to tell someone that you have bulimia the first thing you need to do is consider who you would like to tell.

You could tell a friend, your family doctor, your parents, another relative or your partner. If you are a young person you could think about telling a teacher at school, your school counselor or a youth worker. It's really all about choosing someone that you feel you can trust and will be most comfortable talking to.

There may be more than one person you want to tell, that's fine too. **However it's usually best to talk to them one person at a time to start with.** Start by making a list of ALL the people who could make things easier for you if they understood, accepted and fully supported you in recovery.

Perhaps you could start with the person who you feel would be easiest to tell. You can use the space below to write a list of all the people you would like to tell.

The people I want to tell:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

TIP: If you want to tell your family but feel you could use some additional support then why not think about telling a close friend first. Once they understand what you have been going through you can ask them to come with you for emotional support while you talk to other people.

Action Plan: Step 4

Figure out what you want to tell them

Telling someone that you have bulimia can be an emotionally challenging so its a great idea to spend some time thinking about the things you would like to say.

It might be hard but try not to hold back when it comes to talking about the severity of your bulimia - honesty is the key here.

Topics you may want to cover:

- How long you have had bulimia for.
- Why you have been so afraid to say anything until now.
- How bulimia affects your life.
- You could talk about what bulimia really is to dispel any misconceptions.
- You could explain the recovery process so they understand it will be gradual.
- You could talk about the different ways they can support you in recovery.

You can use the space below to write down any of the things you know you want to cover the first time you talk to your loved one about having bulimia. Writing them down is a good idea in case you forget in the moment.

Topics I want to cover are:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Action Plan: Step 5

Decide how you want them to support you

The real benefit of telling someone that you have bulimia is being able to get that extra support from them during recovery.

Your loved one will need your guidance on this because there is no doubt that they will feel confused about what they can (or should) do to help. It can be useful to tell them exactly how they can support you during recovery.

Remember you are the one with the power here. Of course it can be difficult to always have to take the lead, to continually tell people what you need from them. This can be especially challenging if you're dealing with a parent or older family member who you wish could be the "bigger person" and become more pro-active in helping you to recover.

Sometimes though, the only way to encourage a more supportive reaction and create a recovery-focused environment is for you to take control and ask for the support that you want and deserve.

The people who really care for you should be willing to put in the time and effort that it takes to understand what you are going through and how they can support you but they simply can not do this without YOUR guidance.

The first thing you need to do at this point is decide how you would best like your loved one to support you in recovery.

Here are a few different ways they can support you:

By just being there.

Sometimes you may not want anything more than a friend. Someone you can turn to at times of need and someone whom you can feel free to be yourself around.

By being supportive but not actively becoming involved in your recovery.

Sometimes the person you tell may want to actively become involved in your recovery. It's okay if you don't feel comfortable with that. It's your recovery you have every right to set your own boundaries.

By becoming actively involved in your recovery.

Sometimes you may want your loved one to be a bigger part of your recovery. Helping you to prepare meals or stick to your structured eating plan for example.

By adapting their own behaviors.

Perhaps your loved one often behaves in ways that do not support recovery. It is perfectly fine to ask someone to moderate or adapt their behaviors around you. It doesn't mean they have to change themselves it just means that they can become more considerate of your needs. For example if your loved one constantly diets you could ask them to not talk about this with you.

By becoming educated about the reality of bulimia.

You can help out here a lot by answering questions and providing resources to your loved one that you know paint a true picture of the realities of bulimia.

By helping you with accountability.

You could ask your loved one to help with accountability. Perhaps you could check in with them each day to talk about your progress and challenges.

Use the space below to write down the different ways that your loved ones can support you in recovery. Remember you have the power here, how they support you is completely up to you.

How I want my loved ones to support me:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

You will probably find that different people can support you in different ways. You may want some of the people you tell to become actively involved in your recovery while you may want others to just be there for friendship and general support.

Now you have a general idea of the types of support you would like from your loved ones take a look back at your list of people (from step 3) and think about the varying types of support you would like from each of them.

You can create a list like the one above for each individual person, or just keep one general support list if you'd prefer.

Action Plan: Step 6

Decide how and when you will tell them

Now you need to think about how and when you will tell the people from your list. Can you arrange a time when you know you won't be disturbed by other people? Will you sit and tell your chosen person face to face or would you rather write them a letter or an email to start with?

It really is up to you. There is no right or wrong way to go about this. Think through a couple of different scenarios and then settle on the one that you feel most at ease with.

When deciding how and when you will tell your loved one:

- ✓ Try to choose a time and place that will help you to feel relaxed and secure.
- ✓ Avoid trying to talk about bulimia during meal times, if you're overly tired, have been drinking alcohol or have had an especially bad day in recovery.
- ✓ Choose a time when you think your loved one will be most receptive, for example grabbing them after they get home from a 12 hour shift may not be the best idea.

TIP: Arranging a specific time and place when you will talk to your loved one will help to make sure that you don't back out at the last minute. For example, you could call or message your loved one ahead of time and tell them that you need to talk about something important when you get home.

How, when and where will you tell them?

Prepare to face a whole range of questions

Remember different people will ask different questions. Some people may not even know what bulimia is, or may think they understand when they are actually very misinformed.

Your loved ones may even ask you very awkward, insensitive or personal questions, please try to not take offence and remember that your answers can really help them to develop a better understanding.

Here are some examples of some awkward, insensitive or personal questions that they could ask together with some possible answers that you may find useful:

1. “Why don’t you just stop?”

Possible Answer:

“I wish it was that easy but it’s impossible to just stop having bulimia because bulimia is not a choice. Having bulimia can feel very much like an addiction and actually changes the way your brain works. In time I will re-balance my body, learn how to eat normally and understand how to accept all of my thoughts and feelings without bingeing but this can be a very gradual process. It’s important to take small steps so recovery does not become too overwhelming.”

2. “You look very healthy, is it really that serious?”

Possible answer:

“I was afraid you wouldn’t take me seriously because I look quite healthy on the outside but the truth is that all of the damage and pain is on the inside. Bulimia only

has very subtle visible signs and for most people it's not really anything to do with being underweight."

3. "Are you doing this for attention?"

Possible answer:

"It's very hurtful to hear you say that because I want to recover more than anything but I do understand how difficult it can be for people who have never experienced eating disorders to really understand that they are out of our control. You should know that bulimia has nothing to do with attention seeking. In fact attention is the last thing I wanted which is part of the reason why it took me so long to tell you."

4. "Is this my fault?"

Possible answer:

"I want you to know that bulimia is no ones fault. You certainly didn't cause my bulimia. I understand that you want to blame someone or something but there is no place for blame in recovery now. All that matters is that I am going to work very hard to get better and I am so grateful to have your support along the way."

Sometimes you may feel that you loved one is asking questions that are way too personal or inappropriate. Even if you find certain aspects of bulimia very difficult to talk about you should bear in mind that honesty is important. Try to answer all of their questions anyway.

TIP: If you really feel that you can't answer certain questions then rather than shutting off, not being honest or lying try telling your loved one how the question makes you feel or talk about the reasons why you don't feel comfortable answering it at this stage.

Action Plan: Step 8

Prepare to ask questions yourself

This might seem a little strange but you may find that your loved one freezes up because they just don't know what to say after hearing that you have bulimia. If this happens then you once again should be prepared to take the lead. Asking questions can help the conversation to flow more freely and help your loved one to open up.

You can ask questions about how they feel or to see if they have understood what you have said.

Here are some examples of questions you may wish to ask:

1. I understand that must have been a shock for you to hear, what are you feeling right now?
2. Would you like me to explain a little about bulimia, do you know what it is?
3. I can help you to understand a little bit more about bulimia so you can to support me in recovery, is that something you'd be willing to do?
4. It's okay if you feel a little uncomfortable talking about this straight away. Would you like to take some time and we can talk about it again later on?

Use the space below to write down some different questions that you could ask your loved one.

Questions I could ask my loved one:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Action Plan: Step 9

Understand and prepare for different reactions

People will have varying reactions to the news that you have bulimia. Some may be surprised, uncomfortable, confused, or worried. Others may be angry, scared and unsure of what to say. Some people may even cry or just become very silent.

On the flip side people may be very understanding and compassionate. Some may take an interest and ask lots of questions or may have even seen the signs already and be very glad you have confided in them.

You must keep in mind that no matter how your loved one reacts it will just be their INITIAL REACTION to the news. Try to think of telling someone as a **gradual process** with many conversations and discussions.

“(My mother) explained that at first she just thought I was like every other American girl, just worried about looking good in jeans. Once I really let her in on the “voice” I spoke to myself with, and the fears I really kept about my weight, she saw it was bigger than she thought. At the end of the day it isn’t that my mother or your husband understands. It is that you and I have taken our first step at understanding ourselves.” (Bulimia Help Member, 2011).

So how can you really prepare to deal with different reactions?

Patience, honesty and understanding are the key here:

Try to have patience.

Continue to offer information, suggest reading and maybe write an even more detailed letter explaining your feelings. In a lot of cases you just need to trust that things will be better with a little more time and communication.

Try to be as honest as possible.

This means allowing your loved one to continue to ask you questions and really developing the ability to be honest as possible with your responses.

“Once I told my sister about having bulimia there were a lot of questions. I didn’t want to answer them but the more I did the more I learned that honesty with her helped me to find honesty with myself.” (Bulimia Help Member, 2011).

Understand that your loved ones are people too. They have their own pain, suffering, insecurities and doubts. Understand that finding out you have been in pain and felt unable to reach out to them can often make your loved ones feel like they are somehow to blame.

Why do some people react in unsupportive ways?

Often, as a result of their own conflicting emotions your loved ones can appear to react in ways that do not support recovery. For a time this may cause you to think your previous fears are actually materialising. **Remember is that it can take time for someone who has never experienced bulimia to understand what it really means.** If you do find that your loved one is responding in unsupportive ways understand that it doesn’t necessarily mean they will always feel this way.

What if they just don’t understand?

Despite a lot of hard work, communication and dedication on your behalf in some rare cases you may find that your loved one is simply not able to understand or support you in the ways that you would have liked. In this case you need to remind yourself that you are only responsible for your own thoughts, feelings and actions, not other people’s. You are not responsible for their pain, anger, denial or guilt. You are in no way responsible for their lack of understanding or support.

Remind yourself that you have taken a very brave and powerful step in telling someone about your bulimia, regardless of their reaction. You have broken the silence that previously surrounded your bulimia – this is such a huge achievement.

If you find that your loved one continually lacks the ability to understand and be supportive then you may have to accept that some people may be unable to be there for you but it doesn't mean others will react in this way.

If you have a negative experience telling someone, it is important that you don't let this stop you from getting the professional help and support that you deserve.

TIP: In a situation like this consider who else you may tell such as a friend, family member or professional. Remind yourself that you have nothing to be ashamed of and re-assure yourself that most people will learn how to understand and support your recovery. Believe that you did the right thing!

What about the flip side?

The truth is that when you tell someone about having bulimia it gives you a unique opportunity to be able to form even stronger bonds in your relationship. Lots of people have very positive responses from their loved ones.

Let's take a look at what some of our members at Bulimia Help say were the best parts about telling a loved one that they had bulimia:

"I have been lucky in that everyone I have told (my mum, my two ex's, and my current boyfriend) have all reacted in a way I would have liked them too. None seemed like they judged me and because I was scared they would start paying attention to what I eat and monitor my eating, I was pleased that they didn't."(Bulimia Help Member, 2011).

“The best thing about telling people was that it forced me to completely dismiss all of my previous fears and acknowledge how irrational those fears were in the first place.” (Bulimia Help Member, 2011).

“I was just relieved to tell them as I have been close with all of them and felt a huge sense of relief to not feel as though I was living a lie or putting up this false exterior.” (Bulimia Help Member, 2011)

“Every single person I told was so supportive and considerate. They listened and they didn’t judge. They all told me how proud they were of me for being brave enough to share my story.”(Bulimia Help Member, 2011)

Action Plan: Step 10

Conversation tips and advice

Not sure where to start? A simple “I need to talk to you about something important” or even “I need your help” can be great conversation starting points. You’ll probably feel a bit shaky and anxious when you actually come out with the words “I have bulimia” but it is so empowering it is to say those words out loud.

“I started by saying Mom I need to tell you something, and I need you not to yell at me or be mad at me, I feel incredibly horrible as it is. I really need your support on this” (Bulimia Help Member, 2009)

If you find that your loved one is responding in an un-supportive or challenging way then you should never underestimate the power of this sentence:

“When you say _____ it makes me feel _____ because _____”

Forming your sentence in this way helps you to get your real feelings across without personally attacking your loved one.

For example: If your loved one was to say:

“Bulimia is stupid, you need to stop doing that”

Then you could respond by saying:

When you say bulimia is stupid and I should stop it makes me feel very upset and hurt because bulimia is not a choice. I hate having bulimia and I am going to work

hard to recover but it is not something you can just stop, recovery can take a long time and I would really appreciate your support.

Tip: It can also be a really great idea to use this type of sentence if you find yourself dealing with loved ones who don't really understand the true reality of bulimia:

I understand _____ because _____ but in reality _____

Forming a sentence in this way can help your loved one to challenge their preconceived ideas about bulimia and eating disorders.

For example: If your loved one was to say:

"You're perfect the way you are, you don't need to lose weight"

Then you could respond by saying:

"I understand that sometimes people think having bulimia is all about wanting to lose weight because when you think of eating disorders you can automatically think of weight loss and body obsession but in reality bulimia is more to do with the way people feel on the inside."

Remember that these are just suggestions. You should always talk about your experiences with bulimia and recovery in whatever ways will make you feel the most comfortable. It won't be easy at first but in time talking about bulimia will become very natural.

Finding additional support

At www.bulimiahelp.org

The Bulimia Help community is full of wonderful, strong and inspirational people who are recovering and have recovered from bulimia. With over 8000 members you will always be able to find someone at a similar recovery stage to you who understands exactly how you are feeling.

- ✓ You can ask questions or take part in recovery focused group discussions via the forums.
- ✓ You can use the Bulimia Help chat room for real-time support.
- ✓ You can update your personal blog and share recovery experiences.
- ✓ You can build up your online support network by using the extensive Bulimia Help Friendship Network.
- ✓ You can access a whole range of recovery tools that are exclusive to Bulimia Help.
- ✓ You can receive advice on your eating plan from our licenced nutritionist
- ✓ You can access additional support from our BRS® Coach who will help you to achieve all of your recovery goals.

You can learn more online at www.bulimiahelp.org

Other sources of support...

Remember you deserve help and support. Here are some great ideas for building up your recovery support team:

- You can go to your GP and ask for help.
- You can ask for a referral to a specialist eating disorder service.
- You can seek support from a counselor or therapist.
- You can seek guidance from a dietician or nutritionist.
- You can contact local and national eating disorder help lines.
- You can get involved with your local eating disorder charities
- You can join local eating disorder recovery support groups in your area