

# Eating disorders in Malta

Category: 11-14 years

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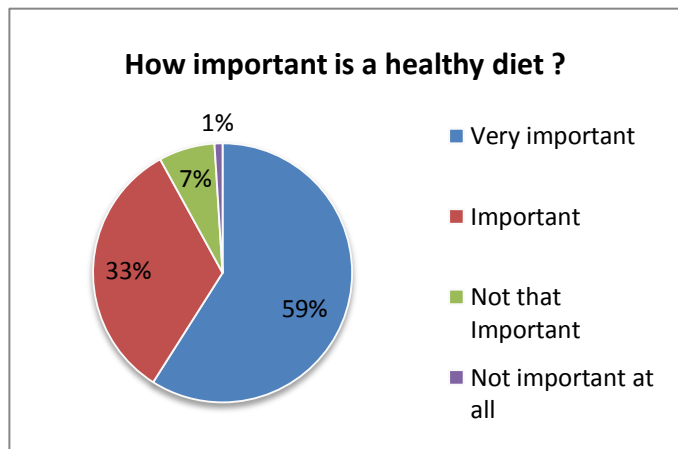
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## Eating Disorders in Malta

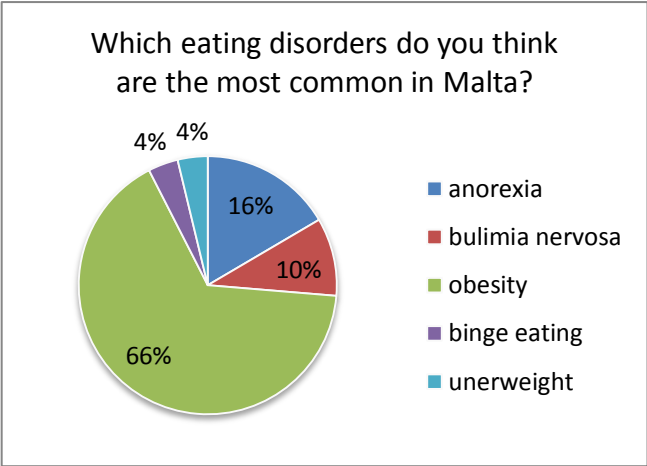
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What are eating disorders? Healthgrove.com puts it quite bluntly and describes eating disorders as a category of mental health disorders that affect a person's thoughts and behaviours regarding food and body image. A study by WHO goes a step further saying that it may lead to a range of behaviours aimed at reducing weight such as severe dieting, and self-induced vomiting amongst others. However, you will probably understand better if we use practical terms that we are used to hearing such as anorexia and bulimia, for example. In this report we have carried out research in order to gauge the perception that Maltese people have about eating disorders and to be able to determine their views about the subject for a better understanding of the issues surrounding eating disorders and in the hope of raising more awareness about them.

Our research is based on 100 questionnaires which we distributed to a representative sample of the local population. 54% of our respondents try to eat healthy food because they want to stay in shape and to be strong. The majority of respondents are also aware that it is very important to follow a healthy diet and thankfully no one said that it's not important at all although a small percentage (7%) said that it's not that important. Asked to define a healthy diet, 52% agreed that it means to eat everything in moderation. We also asked them whether they think that unhealthy eating can lead to other diseases, and 94% are, fortunately, aware of this. When asked to specify which diseases may be a direct consequences of unhealthy eating, they identified diabetes (63%), cholesterol (61%), heart disease (49%) and high blood pressure (39%).



88% of our respondents also agree that unhealthy eating habits may lead to various eating disorders. However, their awareness about eating disorders seems to be less than that for diseases. In fact, though 72% identify obesity as an eating disorder resulting from unhealthy eating habits, there is a lot less awareness about anorexia (37%), bulimia (32%), being underweight (28%) and binge eating (24%). Moreover, though 87% of respondents are aware that obesity is very common in Malta, only 22% think that anorexia is common and 13% think bulimia



is common. Binge eating and being underweight were only identified as common eating disorders by 5% of our respondents. This latter statistic contrasts sharply with a study carried out among 2008 Maltese people by Grech (2013) which determined that:

‘Binge eating was the most common eating disorder, with 55.8 per cent of respondents having this condition, followed by Anorexia (34.3 per cent) and Bulimia (13.3 per cent). These results were comparable to those of other European countries.’

According to former president George Abela (2014), only four years ago, there were ‘just fewer than 2,000 persons who suffer from an eating disorder’ in Malta.

Luckily, the vast majority (85%) of our respondents think that eating disorders should be treated as a very serious medical problem, though, on the other hand 55% of them don’t know where to go for help if suffering from an eating disorder. In fact, only 7% were able to mention, Dar Kenn għal-Saħħtek as a home to help patients suffering from eating disorders. More than half our respondents associate eating disorders with females (young girls, 54%, young women,

52%) whereas less than a third are aware that men may also suffer from eating disorders (young boys, 26%; young men, 30%). However, in reality

‘An estimated 10-15% of people with anorexia or bulimia are males. Many clinicians believe that this figure is underreported because many men are ashamed to admit that they may be suffering from something thought to affect only women.’

(Mirasol, 2017)

Our research reveals that there isn't enough awareness about the three main eating disorders (anorexia, bulimia and binge eating disorder). They may be, as our respondents reported, a consequence of an unhealthy diet or low self-esteem, or stress or even too much pressure to look good, among other things. However, the fact remains that eating disorders are serious mental illnesses, and unless properly treated they are life threatening. In fact, according to Mirasol (2017) they 'have the highest mortality rate of any mental illness'. Therefore, the importance of raising awareness about this issue cannot be denied. The government, health care and the media all play a critical role in this, though undoubtedly the most important role is held by schools. Schools not only need to promote a healthy lifestyle among their students, but they need to raise awareness about this reality, its consequences and where to seek help among students and parents alike in their quest for real, sustainable education.

## **References:**

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