

# Night eating syndrome



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Night eating syndrome is not widely spoken about and it is still a disorder that is not fully understood.

A lot of people have admitted that they wake up in the middle of the night to snack. A lot have even said its something they have done for years. Some people seem completely unfazed by it.

The light snack in the middle of the night does seem relatively harmless, especially if its not bothering the individual.

However, what happens with the type of night eating syndrome that stems from unresolved issues around food and is causing an array of complex issues in your everyday life?

What happens when we are waking up 3,4,5 times in the middle of the night? Each time unable to fall back to sleep unless we eat. What happens if we are not enjoying getting up because we are panicking about how much we are consuming? What if these moments of going to eat are

actually binge sessions and we are consuming copious amounts of calories each sitting?

This is where things start to really effect a persons life. These types of sittings with food every night can create a great deal of stress and anxiety within a person.

‘In the end I dreaded going to bed. It became a source of anguish and despair not knowing what the night was going to hold for me.’

Going to sleep is a time where the body repairs itself and you are able to shut off and rest your mind. However, this fails to happen with someone that suffers with night eating syndrome. This is because their sleep is broken numerous times in the middle of the night.

Night eating syndrome is usually built on the back of another eating disorder. When I got night eating syndrome, I had recovered from anorexia. My weight since recovering had been a constant battle. I was completely disorganized with my eating habits. I couldn't live in a happy medium which is where for me the development of binge eating and bulimia started.

People that suffer with night eating syndrome find themselves waking up at the exact same times in the middle of the night.

‘I found myself waking up at the exact same times such as 12.03am, 2.41am, 3,29am, 5.33am.’

The need to eat feels uncontrollable and after tossing and turning trying to refrain from getting up it becomes unable to resist.

The eating episode will then consist of binging on things like cereal, sweets and bread or whatever is available in the cupboards.

‘It became a binge session for me and my control and will power to be able to stop this urge felt completely out of reach.

When it was time to get up, I had food in my teeth, on my pjs and the kitchen was a complete mess.

This made me feel completely distraught. I felt uncomfortable and dirty in the mornings and extremely tired. Suddenly when it was actually time to get up, I felt I could sleep for a thousand hours.

‘I was physically and emotionally exhausted.’

If things had been really bad, my last episode of getting up and eating usually ended up with me purging for hours. This left me extremely weak and disorientated that I would miss important things I had to do that day. I would end up feeling completely hopeless, lost, lonely and disgusted with myself.

All I wanted to do was shut the world out and escape this horrendous routine that had taken over my life. Facing the day actually gave me more anxiety.

## So what's going on behind the scenes?

When we have an unhealthy relationship with food, this is a trigger that can start night eating syndrome.

My life since I could remember was one obsessive thought about what I could eat and couldn't eat. I was obsessed with food but it was a love hate relationship. I was never comfortable with food, it was a source of anxiety and deep struggle.

'I never understood where food stood in my life. It never fitted in where it wasn't a source of worry, guilt, temptation or fear.'

People with night eating syndrome live with food deprivation. They are usually on diets that consist of very low calorie intake, restrictions of what one can and can't eat and even starving oneself.

People with night eating syndrome that binge eat experience the same punishment and deprivation. This is because a person that binge eats is always trying to counteract the last binge and so will do the same.

Extreme, unrealistic diets are employed in order to mitigate weight gain. Binge eaters can also purge to create this food deprivation.

People with night eating syndrome tend to skip meals and have very disorganised eating patterns during the day.

‘For myself I was an avid picker. I never sat down to eat a meal but I picked at everything.’

This created a great deal of dissatisfaction as I never felt I had eaten anything or enjoyed anything.

People with NES go to bed hungry because they are not fuelling their bodies adequately during the day. This causes a person to wake up in the middle of the night and eat.

Repeating this action of getting up to eat at these different times causes a new internal clock to form. The actions we take such as getting up to eat reinforces our internal clock that it is something it needs to do every night. This is why it starts waking you up at the exact same times each night.

After a while the internal clock is so engrained into how you sleep the body itself doesn't believe that it is doing anything wrong. The act of eating at those times actually causes the body to now expect food at those particular times each night. A feeding schedule has been created and you actually wake up feeling starving. This is what makes the cycle even harder to break.

Trying to fight this internal clock and the body's expectation for food becomes unbearable. A person can lay awake for hours wide awake until they give in and eat.

## Why has my night eating syndrome turned into bingeing?

People with NES eat more than 25% of their daily calorie intake after dinner and before breakfast. However, it's not uncommon for people to be consuming more than that especially if they have underlying issues with food such as a binge eating disorder.

I found that I was consuming all of my daily calorie intake. I was having cereal bowl after cereal bowl and copious amounts of high sugary foods each time I got up.

Night eating syndrome causes a person to feel out of control around food on these nightly sittings. They become full of despair because they don't feel in control of their actions. The incessant need to eat feels like it is driving them and there is nothing they can do about it.

The new found hunger pangs at night became uncontrollable and paired with my guilt and anxiety it perpetuated my binge eating. This meant that each day I woke up I was either purging or attempting to starve all day to counteract the binge on the night. This only spiralled my unhealthy relationship with food and prolonged my night eating syndrome and binge eating.

## How can I faze night eating syndrome out of my life?

We have to heal our relationship with food in order for night eating syndrome to become weaker and eventually gone.

All the time we have a disorganised eating pattern and an unhealthy relationship with food we are not creating food peace. This is because we always feel deprived, tempted, lacking and anxious. It is what causes our actual food obsession and keeps food thoughts on the brain as we go to bed.

Healing our relationship with food means starting to feed ourselves again. It is about sitting down each day and having at least three square meals a day. It about stopping the dieting, the restricting and the labelling of food and giving yourself permission to eat. This stops you from going to bed hungry, punished and deprived. It gives the concept of food abundance. This helps you mentally because it stops you from obsessing over food because you have allowed yourself to have it.

This can be enough for some people and they can actually faze night eating syndrome out of their lives when all restrictive eating patterns have stopped.

However, this is not the case for everyone. Their internal clock will not be tamed by just the act of feeding oneself adequately during the day. A habit has been formed and the act of eating at night has actually caused a dopamine addiction that we find the same in binge eaters. The internal clock has become reinforced by this dopamine addiction to keep waking you up.

## How did I faze binge eating out of my life?

I knew that this was more than just hunger and the problem laid with the the dopamine release I got whilst eating on these nightly feasts.

My body was also so use to being fed large amounts of food at this time so I was actually dealing with hunger pangs. I had created a whole new eating routine because of how much I was eating in these sittings. Feeding myself adequately during the day was still not shutting off the hunger pangs because I had been eating a days worth of calories or sometimes more during the night.

I realised the only way to faze NES out would be to slowly alter my portion sizes on a night over time.



However, how do we do this when we wake up in a binge eating frenzy craving a dopamine rush?

Practicing mindful eating, food abundance and permission to eat during the day is a good start because you are not working against yourself anymore. The reason why NES becomes so prolific is because just like bingeing through the day you start to hate yourself and become your own worst enemy.

Taking away my restrictive habits and thought process stopped the feeling of being under attack and feeling punished.

But I had to severely alter what was happening on the night.

I made a conscious decision to get better

1. I left any notion of worry about weight at the door.
2. I allowed myself to eat what I wanted when I wanted during the day
3. I stopped my negative internal dialogue and instead became compassionate towards myself day and night. This was a mindset change.
4. I told myself that when I wake up in the middle of the night that I will get up and eat without panic or guilt
5. I told myself I would have more self awareness and stop disassociating by being mindful when I got up to eat

6. I said I would make myself the food in the middle of the night in an organized, deliberate fashion and eat slowly.
7. I would eat any of the food I wanted as long as it was mindfully and organised.
8. I would listen to my body and try and recognise the feelings of fullness.
9. If I wanted another bowl of food I would have it. Without guilt. All the while listening to my body and trying to recognise my feelings of satisfaction more.
10. I told myself nothing was off limits tomorrow so if I wanted more I can have it tomorrow and anytime. I didn't need to consume everything in the now.

The first step to fazing NES out is about regaining control on the night time eating sessions.

Eating unorganized is because you are panicking and telling yourself you shouldn't be doing it. Instead you need to accept that you know you will be getting up. This stops the despair and chaos around the food when you go to eat.

Practicing those habits for a while I started to become extremely present and I started to feel more in control. The act of not berating myself for getting up to eat weakened my chaotic urge and behaviour when I ate

Being present slowed down this frenzied, frantic mind set I would get into where I would just shovel anything into my mouth.

After eating in an orderly fashion I made a conscious effort to tidy and wash the pots. This reinforced that I was organized, conscious and

deliberate in all that I was doing and there was no need to feel guilt or shame.

I was now strong enough to start the next faze.

## **Faze 2**

It was time to start reducing these hunger pangs and fazing the internal clock out.

In this stage I started to reduce my portion sizes. Two bowls of cereal became one. One bowl of cereal became a smaller bowl of cereal. A small bowl of cereal became a protein bar or a piece of toast and so on.

This fazing out really started to work, my hunger pangs didn't seem so painful, I woke up not as interested to eat but still knowing I needed to in order to fall asleep.

I realised that it wasn't just the case of eating that was causing me to wake up but also the actual act of getting out of bed.

Once my portion sizes had become so small I attempted to now make the effort to not get out of bed. I did this by keeping a small piece of chocolate by the side of my bed.

Once I woke up, I didn't get up out of bed but I sat up and ate the piece of chocolate and then laid back down to go to sleep.

**(In the case of anyone trying this. Please do not eat anything half asleep or laid down. Ensure that all the food is eaten fully awake and finished before you lay down to sleep)**

Eventually when I did wake up, I was able to ignore the need to eat and actually fall back to sleep.

This was the way I faded binge eating out of my life. It didn't happen overnight but I stopped wanting to get better in the now and accepted that it was going to be a process. I gave myself time and stopped being in a race to get better. I treated myself with compassion which allowed me to see where I was going wrong and this gave me the ability to fix it and recover.