



# Bulimia Nervosa

When Shame and Secrecy Drive Self-Medication

## What is Bulimia Nervosa?

**Bulimia Nervosa** is an eating disorder defined by recurring cycles of binge eating followed by compensatory behaviors such as self-induced vomiting, laxative use, or extreme restriction. The disorder creates a tireless preoccupation with food, body image, and control that disrupts relationships, daily functioning, and emotional stability.

## What Does It Look Like?

- > **Binge Episodes**  
They eat large amounts of food in secret, feeling powerless to stop.
- > **Purging Behaviors**  
Vomiting, laxatives, or restriction follow the binge to undo what happened.
- > **Shame and Secrecy**  
The cycle is carefully hidden, creating a double life that is exhausting to maintain.
- > **Distorted Body Image**  
No amount of restriction or control ever feels like enough.

## How Does Bulimia Nervosa Contribute to Relapse?

For someone with bulimia, the relentless shame and shared impulsive patterns make substances the fastest escape from a body and mind that feel out of control.

- 1) **Shared Impulsivity Drives Both Disorders**  
The impulsivity that fuels bingeing also fuels substance use.
- 2) **Short-Term Programs Miss the Full Picture**  
Shame, body image, and impulsivity take far longer than a few weeks to address.
- 3) **Without Treating Bulimia, the Shame Remains**  
The binge-purge pattern persists, and substances provide the fastest relief.

### **Prevalence:**

**~1%** of U.S. adults in their lifetime<sup>1</sup>

### **Co-Occurrence:**

**37%** develop a co-occurring substance use disorder<sup>2</sup>

### **Relapse Risk:**

**Significant** Increased risk of relapse and treatment dropout<sup>3</sup>

Sources: <sup>1</sup> Hudson JI et al., *Biological Psychiatry* (2007). <sup>2</sup> Hudson JI et al. (2007); cited in Sysko R et al., *Eur Eat Disord Rev* (2009). <sup>3</sup> Courbasson C et al., *BMC Psychiatry* (2013)

# Long-Term Treatment for Bulimia Nervosa and Addiction

Bulimia Nervosa and addiction reinforce each other through shared patterns of impulsivity, shame, and the temporary relief of self-destructive behavior. A short-term program can't address either condition deeply enough. Without sustained treatment, the shame cycle underlying both continues unchecked.

Our **long-term, progress-based model** gives clients the time and clinical structure to address bulimia and addiction together. Clients advance through treatment phases when they demonstrate genuine changes in impulsivity, emotional regulation, and their relationship with food, body, and substances.



*"Bulimia doesn't show up in our clients without company. By the time someone reaches us, we're often treating disordered eating, substance use, trauma, and years of shame all at once. That complexity takes time to address."*



 **Meghan Bohlman, LPC-S, LCDC, EMDR-Trained**  
Executive Clinical Director, Burning Tree Ranch

## Dual Diagnosis Treatment for Bulimia Nervosa

When bulimia goes untreated alongside addiction, the shame cycle driving bingeing also drives substance use, and neither disorder resolves without addressing both.

- **Treating Both Conditions Together**  
Unaddressed shame and impulsivity sustain both behaviors.
- **Rebuilding the Relationship with Self**  
Real, lasting recovery requires more than abstinence.
- **Providing Enough Time for Real Change**  
Shame-driven patterns can't be rewired in a few weeks.

### Dual Diagnosis:

The presence of **both a substance use disorder and a mental health condition** occurring together. Effective treatment for dual-diagnosis addictions must address both aspects simultaneously.



### Have Other Treatment Programs Missed the Deeper Issues?

Burning Tree Ranch is the Nation's only authentic long-term treatment program for chronic relapse. Call us at (866) 287-2877 or visit us online at [www.BurningTree.com](http://www.BurningTree.com).

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