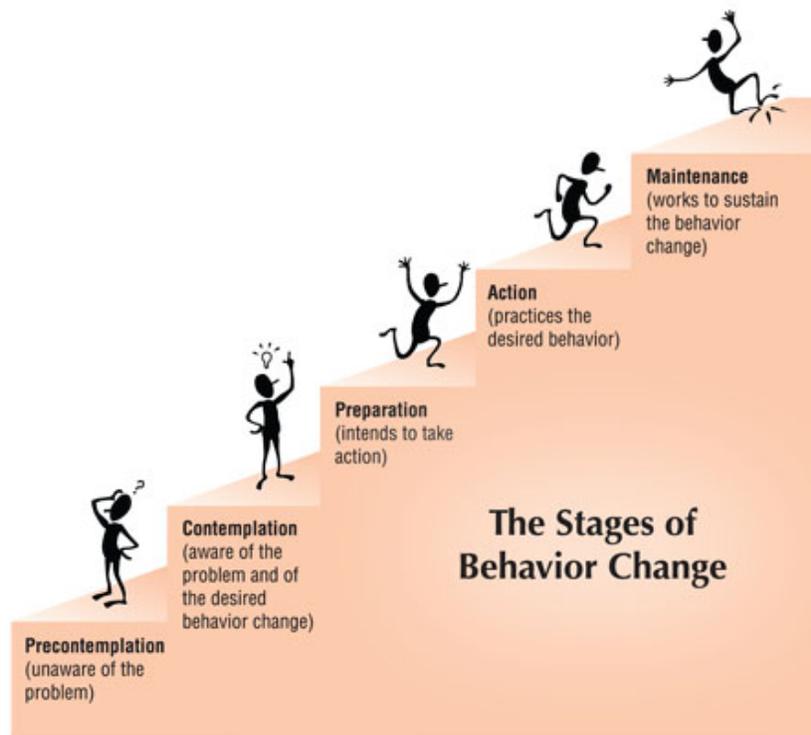


### Coming off Laxatives

Many people who suffer from bulimia and anorexia find themselves abusing laxatives - that means taking more than the recommended dose, or taking them too regularly over a period of weeks, months or even years. Here we would like to give you some guidelines to help you come off laxatives. These are not hard and fast rules, but rather ideas and suggestions that some people have found useful, and which you might like to use as a starting point in your journey to recovery.

### Behaviour Change

Coming off laxatives is about changing your behaviour, which is something everyone finds difficult. However, it can be that little bit easier if you understand the stages of behaviour change and how you can make them work for you.



Sources: Grimley 1997 (75) and Prochaska 1992 (148)

If you are reading this information sheet, then you are likely at the Contemplation stage of coming off laxatives. Let's help you make it to the Preparation stage and beyond.

### Preparation: A Plan of Action

Before you begin, try to prepare yourself mentally for the task ahead of you:

1. **Think about why you take laxatives** - there are probably a number of reasons, and you may find it helpful to make a note of these reasons or to discuss them with a friend or counsellor.
2. **Consider the situations in which you take laxatives:**
  - At a set time every day?
  - After a binge?
  - When you are alone or depressed?
3. **Try to focus on the positive side of giving up laxatives** - and write down some of the benefits of kicking the habit:
  - Laxative abuse can have serious and long-term effects on your health, and by giving up laxatives you will undoubtedly be improving your health.
  - Your appearance is also likely to improve - most people find that their skin looks better and their stomach becomes less bloated.
  - You will save money.
  - You will be able to feel proud that you have managed to break the vicious cycle.
  - You will be one step nearer to recovery from your eating disorder.

### Action: Stopping Laxatives

If you have been taking laxatives for just a short while, or if you only take relatively small amounts, you may be able to stop all at once. Throw away all your packets, don't keep any in the house and don't let yourself buy any more. This will not be easy, but some people do find that breaking the habit in this way works. If, however, you have been abusing laxatives for some time, or if you take large doses, you may find that a more gradual approach is better. You could try cutting down the amount of laxatives you take - a realistic target might be to reduce the number you take by 10% each week, so that after ten weeks you will no longer be taking any. Alternatively, you might like to try keeping certain days of the week 'laxative free,' and then gradually increase the number of days when you don't take them until you are no longer taking them at all. Keep a record of your progress.

### Maintenance: Preventing Relapse

By making yourself aware of some of the problems you might encounter when coming off laxatives, you can prepare yourself for such hurdles.

## Eating Disorder Support Services

### **Stomach Problems**

You might feel a bit bloated at first, but this is temporary. Most people find that in the long-term their stomach is less bloated after giving up laxatives. Wearing loose clothes can help. Do not panic if you find that you temporarily become constipated. 'Rebound constipation' is a common, but not inevitable side-effect of laxative abuse and will ease with time and with a healthy and normal-sized diet.

You can reduce this problem by increasing the amount of fibre in your diet. Vegetables, wholemeal bread, and fresh and dried fruit are all good sources of fibre. It is better not to eat large amounts of bran as this can interfere with the absorption of important vitamins and minerals. It is important to drink plenty of water.

Interestingly, a good breakfast that contains some natural fat is an effective stimulant to help your bowels work. For example, you could try egg and bacon or peanut butter on wholegrain toast. This might sound scary, but if you feel able to try this, it will help you towards your recovery goals.

### **Weight**

Try not to panic about gaining weight - some people do find that their weight increases when they stop taking laxatives, but this is invariably temporary. If you stop taking laxatives and eat a normal healthy diet, you will not become overweight. Keep reminding yourself that all the medical evidence suggests that laxatives **DO NOT** help weight loss; they simply make you dehydrated. It is fluids and valuable vitamins and minerals that are lost, rather than calories.

### **Reaching Out: Seek Support**

Giving up laxatives is often difficult and support can really help. Confide in someone who will understand what you are going through and who can offer you the encouragement and support you need. Sometimes a close friend or relative can help. You may have a sympathetic GP, counsellor, psychologist or psychiatrist. Seeking support can help you to also tackle other aspects of your eating disorder at the same time as trying to come off laxatives. This is important for full recovery as it is easy to replace one unhealthy behaviour (i.e. laxatives) with another (i.e. vomiting) without the help and guidance of others.

### **Transcendence: Keep Going**

Finally, try not to be depressed by setbacks. Giving up laxatives is not easy, and not everyone will succeed first time. Be kind to yourself and be proud of any progress you make. Take one day at a time. If you manage to cut down the amount of laxatives you take, but do not yet feel ready to stop altogether, then that is still an achievement. Even if your efforts are not successful, any attempt at giving up laxatives is a step in the right direction and will help you move towards transcendence – the maintenance of a new, healthier way of living.