SECOND EDITION

Getting Better Bite by Bite

A survival kit for sufferers of bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorders

Ulrike Schmidt, Janet Treasure and June Alexander
Getting Better Bite by Bite

*Getting Better Bite by Bite* is an essential, authoritative and evidence-based self-help programme that has been used by bulimia sufferers for over 20 years. This new edition maintains the essence of the original book, while updating its content for today’s readers, drawing on the latest knowledge of the biology and psychology of bulimia and its treatment.

The book provides step-by-step guidance for change based on solid research. The use of everyday language, stimulating contemporary case study story-telling and evocative illustrations in *Bite by Bite* provide encouragement, hope and new perspectives for all readers.

This handy-sized book fills a need for easy-to-understand information about bulimia nervosa, a serious and prevalent eating disorder. Ulrike Schmidt and Janet Treasure are world-renowned researchers and authorities on eating disorders, and June Alexander, a former sufferer of anorexia and bulimia, is a respected writer and internationally-known eating disorder awareness advocate. *Getting Better Bite by Bite* is a valuable resource – for sufferers, for their families, and for the health professionals and carers treating them.

**Ulrike Schmidt** is Professor of Eating Disorders at King’s College London and a consultant psychiatrist in the Eating Disorders Unit at the Maudsley Hospital, London, UK. Her research covers all aspects of eating disorders, from causes to treatments. She has a particular interest in developing novel treatments, especially brief interventions that can be widely disseminated. She is the author of several popular self-help books and award-winning online therapy programmes.

**Janet Treasure**, OBE, PhD, FRCP, FRCPsych, is a professor and a psychiatrist who works in research and teaching at King’s College London and as a clinician at the South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust (www.thenewmaudsleyapproach.co.uk). Professor Treasure’s research interests include conjoint working with patients and carers using translational research to develop new forms of treatment.

**June Alexander** developed anorexia nervosa at age 11, an illness that challenged and shaped her life. A love of words became a survival tool. She kept a diary
and developed a journalism career. Since 2006, June has applied lived experience and literary skills to write about eating disorders. A PhD candidate, June serves on Australian and international organisations, including AED, F.E.A.S.T. and NEDC. Her website: www.junealexander.com.

*Getting Better Bite by Bite* illustrator, **Elise Pacquette**, who also has experienced an eating disorder, hopes her works will help the reader to personalise their journey and to see that although obstacles may appear, when the decision to start the journey has been made, every step is one closer to freedom.
“Countless subjects afflicted with bulimia have already benefited from using the original self-help manual, one of the first written after the description of these disorders. The new edition retains the appeal of the original through a friendly style, moving case-vignettes and ingenious illustrations. Some additions enable the inclusion of new research on the body image disturbance and on refined treatment techniques, while an extra chapter facilitates access to sources of help in different parts of the world. I recommend this book with full enthusiasm.”

– Gerald Russell, Emeritus Professor of Psychiatry, Institute of Psychiatry, King’s College London

“Ulrike Schmidt, Janet Treasure and June Alexander make an outstanding team in this second edition of one of the foremost self-help manuals for sufferers with bulimic disorders. Drs Schmidt and Treasure are at the cutting edge in their clinical and research work in this domain, and adding June Alexander to this team provides this edition with an eloquent voice that represents sufferers and carers. This book is a great practical guide for those who are unwell, and also for those of you who are there to guide these individuals through their struggles toward recovery – professionals, families and friends alike.”

– Daniel Le Grange, PhD, Benioff UCSF Professor in Children’s Health, University of California, San Francisco, USA

“Getting Better Bite by Bite is a beautifully illustrated step-by-step guide for eating disorders recovery. Through rich storytelling and concrete practical exercises reflecting decades of collective clinical experience, this book accompanies the reader across the stepping stones to recovery. Warmth, compassion, and deep understanding flow from every page integrating perspectives of two of the most respected eating disorder clinicians in the world and a survivor/advocate. This guide avoids jargon and provides solid advice for anyone with an eating disorder. A rich resource for every library and a comforting companion for anyone contemplating recovery.”

– Cynthia Bulik, PhD, FAED, Professor, Karolinska Institutet and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, author of Midlife Eating Disorders and Binge Control
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Second edition

Ulrike Schmidt,
Janet Treasure
and
June Alexander
We thank our patients, whose stories, comments and ideas were invaluable in developing this book.
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About the authors

**Ulrike Schmidt** is professor of eating disorders at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neurosciences at King’s College London. She is also a consultant psychiatrist in the Eating Disorders Unit at the Maudsley Hospital. She was a member of the NICE Eating Disorders Guidelines Development Group, chair of the Section of Eating Disorders at the Royal College of Psychiatrists and a board member of the Academy for Eating Disorders (AED). She is a Council member of Beat, the UK’s main eating disorders charity. She is the recipient of a 2005 NHS Award for Innovative Service Delivery, the 2009 AED Leadership Award for Clinical, Educational and Administrative Services, the 2013 KCL Supervisory Excellence Award and the 2014 Hilde Bruch Award for Outstanding Achievements in Eating Disorders Research and Treatment. Professor Schmidt has published some 300 peer-reviewed papers and 90 other publications on eating disorders, including text books, chapters, patient manuals, and web-based treatment or training packages. A key focus of her research has been on development of brief scalable psychological treatments for eating disorders.

**Janet Treasure**, OBE, is a psychiatrist who has worked professionally with people with eating disorders for over 33 years at the Eating Disorder Unit at the South London and Maudsley Hospital NHS Trust, which is a leading centre in clinical management and training of eating disorders. She was chairman of the physical treatment section of the UK NICE guideline committee. She is the chief medical advisor for Beat (the main UK eating disorder charity). She was awarded with a leadership for research with the Academy of Eating Disorders in 2007 and was also awarded a lifetime achievement award from the Academy of Eating Disorders and from Beat in 2014. She is trustee of the charities Student Minds, Charlotte's Helix, Diabetics with Eating Disorders and the Psychiatry Research Trust and is on the scientific board of the charities SUCCEED, MAED – Mothers Against Eating Disorders and FEAST.

**June Alexander** is a writer and PhD candidate. At age 11, June developed anorexia nervosa and this challenge, together with a love of writing, shaped her life. Upon recovering from her illness at age 55 in 2006, June departed a journalism career to write books about eating disorders – combining life experience
About the authors

June Alexander, author, assists health practitioners and mainstream readers in disseminating evidence-based research. She serves on national and international mental health and advocacy organizations, including the Academy of Eating Disorders, F.E.A.S.T., and the National Eating Disorders Collaboration (Australia). June's website and blog support advocacy work. She speaks publicly on the theme “Hope at Every Age” and offers workshops on writing as a therapy. June is a PhD candidate at CQUniversity, Australia, exploring how diary writing can be used in the treatment of eating disorders and is a mentor for inpatients in a hospital eating disorders unit. June can be found at www.junealexander.com.

Elise Pacquette, illustrator, draws inspiration from her recovery from anorexia nervosa. She understands the journey towards recovery, including the hesitant start, the obstacles, and the temptations and slip-ups. Elise appreciates that her journey not only led to recovery but was also rewarding, providing insights and self-understanding that have been invaluable. Elise is now married with children and, inspired by her eating disorder experience, has created a course for 11–12-year-olds to attend with their parents/carers about growing up and becoming independent; run as an after-school club, this course assists parents and children to explore what it means to grow up in today’s culture. Elise wishes all those who journey through this book the strength to keep going, step by step, bite by bite.
The important message throughout every page of *Getting Better Bite by Bite* is that recovery is possible, at every age. This book does not pretend that recovery from an eating disorder is easy. What this book does do is arm you with skills and knowledge to make your recovery journey as smooth and rewarding as possible.

*Getting Better Bite by Bite* portrays what life is really like, living with bulimia nervosa or binge eating disorder. (Hereafter, we will usually just use the term bulimia). Until directly affected by an eating disorder, most people’s perception of these illnesses is obtained from the media. The perception is almost always nothing like reality. There is nothing glamorous or desirable about bulimia or binge eating. Much mystique remains. Misconceptions and misinformation abound about the causes, the health risks and the treatment. Access to treatment is difficult for many sufferers, and friends and relatives often have no idea how to help. Also, some doctors are not sympathetic or understanding, and make the person feel their problem is self-inflicted and trivial and thereby compound the illness characteristics of guilt, shame and loneliness.

This book was originally written for the patients with bulimia attending the Eating Disorders Clinic at the Maudsley Hospital, London. Our patients wanted
information about their illness and practical advice on how to overcome their problems. This book contains in condensed form what we know to be the essential ingredients of cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), a form of therapy endorsed by the UK’s National Institute of Health and Care Excellence as the most effective treatment for bulimia. In addition, it incorporates evidence-based strategies for successfully changing problem behaviours as outlined in the NICE guidelines for Behaviour Change.

Getting Better Bite by Bite is unique in several respects. It strongly focuses on enhancing readers’ motivation and belief in their ability to change, includes strategies for dealing with common accompanying problems and has an easy-to-read conversational style. The first edition of Getting Better Bite by Bite, released in 1993, has helped many eating disorder sufferers, not only at the Maudsley but around the world. We know this because many people wrote to us after working through the book to tell us their personal recovery story and give us feedback. Many people, on reading this book, have felt empowered to tackle their eating problem and, beyond that, to address other difficulties in their lives, too. Some people – often those feeling less sure about what they want – found the book helpful in understanding their problem and gaining tools to make an informed decision about whether or not to enter treatment.

Clinical trials using this book have shown that a significant proportion of people working through this book by themselves make a full and lasting recovery from their eating disorder, and when this book is used with a few sessions of support and guidance from a therapist, it is as effective and more sustainable than a much longer face-to-face CBT treatment.

CBT delivered by a therapist typically includes a case formulation in the form of a diagram or map showing how a person’s difficulties all “hang together”. This can be very helpful, especially if it is really tailored to an individual. However, this approach does not always “hit the spot” for the person if, for example, the map is too complicated or too simple, or makes the person feel forced into an unhelpful structure. The available research evidence suggests that therapists like these diagrams, but it is not clear how helpful or necessary such diagrams actually are for people in overcoming their difficulties. We therefore decided not to put such a diagram into this book. Instead, we have taken a problem-led approach, with each chapter tackling an area relevant to most or particular subgroups of people with bulimia or binge eating.

This updated Second Edition can help you, too, on your journey to recovery. You must undertake this journey of change yourself, but we can be like your support crew, ready to help you plan and prepare and to be beside you as you travel towards your destination. We can provide maps and point out the dangers and pitfalls along the route. Importantly, we can help you find a way to overcome the inevitable obstacles. No matter how big the obstacle, we can help you find a way around it and work with you to achieve recovery. Remember, there is always a solution.

You may have mixed feelings about leaving the sense of security that accompanies the familiar territory of bulimia. You know that there are severe dangers on all sides, and you may have constructed ways of ignoring or suppressing those
dangers. You will feel frightened about entering the new territory without the backup of your bulimia or binge eating behaviours. This book is filled with the travellers’ tales of people like yourself who have made the journey before you. They are here to travel with you, to keep you company and help to decrease your sense of isolation.

This book is full of clues on how to avoid the traps of self-defeating thought patterns. It contains the tools you need to travel safely along the road to recovery. It shines a light on changes that you can make to replace the short-lived and doomed-to-fail rewards that you get from your illness. Getting Better Bite by Bite offers safe, reliable, long-lasting alternatives.

Getting Better Bite by Bite also will help you to anticipate, and prepare for, obstacles and detours on the way. You may experience initial discomfort (just like we get aches when we start a new exercise or dance routine, as latent muscle groups are brought into use), but persevere because eventually you will get past this stage and start to recognize and enjoy the many benefits of your new skills and new-found strengths.

Not everyone is successful at first. Setbacks and lapses commonly occur. However, always remain hopeful because you can learn from these experiences. For some sufferers, the change process is slow and laborious, requiring many attempts before achieving freedom of self; others find the way is easier.

The time taken to recover from bulimia or binge eating disorder is three months on average, but differs for each person. Vigilance and a high level of self-awareness is often necessary for years afterwards to ensure your life remains unshackled by the eating disorder.

You may feel, “I can’t help myself. I have tried. My problem is too severe for this. I need someone else to take over.” However, any form of treatment can work only when you are actively involved. The more you put in, the more you will strengthen and empower your true sense of self. So you might as well start now. We don’t expect that reading Getting Better Bite by Bite will make you suddenly “snap out” of your problem. However, deciding to do what it takes to stop your chaotic eating pattern is the important first step on a journey that leads to increased freedom and self-esteem.

A few words of caution

Some people are persuaded by their families or partners to work on their problems. This book can help only if you really want to get better for yourself. Getting Better Bite by Bite can’t help if you are not ready to change, or if you just want to change to please somebody else. To assess your readiness for undertaking the recovery journey, go to Chapter 1; fill in your own balance sheet, and keep it close by (in your bag or pocket) for regular consultation wherever you go.

You will be asked to do a lot of hard work over the next few weeks. Even when you are determined to get better, there are bound to be ups and downs. The best way to cope is to take each day as it comes and focus on living in the moment, rather than the past.
You may feel tempted to “binge” on this book, that is, read it quickly and throw it in a corner, telling yourself, “this is nothing new”; “I knew all this, already”. This is certainly what the eating disorder bully wants you to think. Strive to be honest with, and listen to, your own true self. Take time to absorb and digest each chapter slowly.

What this book can and can’t do

*Getting Better Bite by Bite* can’t cure you but can help you acquire new coping skills, so that the eating disorder no longer rules your life. This book is not aimed primarily at helping you to understand why you developed an eating problem. Understanding the underlying causes is often difficult and happens only gradually, if at all. To know what caused the eating problem is important, but rarely helps to change distressing eating symptoms. *Getting Better Bite by Bite* aims to help you develop new skills to ease these symptoms and to help you gain control over your life. Once eating symptoms are addressed, underlying causes often become clearer and a decision will be easier regarding whether you need treatment in your own right.

Notes and references

3. We compared six widely available CBT self-help interventions for bulimia and found that GBBB was by far the most easy and straight forward read (Musiat, P. & Schmidt, U., 2010. Chapter in Agras, W.S. (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Eating Disorders*. Oxford Library of Psychology).
resources and think about what you can do yourself; this is more helpful than waiting for someone else (a therapist) to provide the answers for you.

Finally, we and others have found that working through the book and actually doing the suggested between-session tasks leads to much better outcomes than simply skim reading it (Beintner, I., et al. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 2014;34(2):158–176). This may sound obvious but is crucial.