

action
mental
health

Eating disorders support

Supporting a loved one during eating disorder recovery



Introduction

The effects of an eating disorder are often felt not only by the person experiencing it, but also by their family and support network.

We have created this guide because families of those with an eating disorder have said that they often feel unsure about how to support their loved one, while they themselves are also impacted and in need of support. This guide subsequently focuses on how to look out for the whole family, as everyone within it has a role in the recovery journey and each person deserves support with that.

There is considerable evidence for the positive impact on treatment outcomes for someone with an eating disorder if their families are fully informed and engaged at all stages from diagnosis, through treatment and after discharge. Nevertheless, families and carers of people affected by eating disorders commonly report that they do not understand the illness or what to do about it.

From speaking with families who have accessed our eating disorders support, it's clear that they all care deeply for their loved ones. However, they are often unsure about how to navigate the various challenges that come with an eating disorder, which includes looking after their own wellbeing.

Through this guide, we therefore aim to equip carers with best practice strategies that will support their loved ones on their recovery journeys. Alongside this, we'll also help carers to develop their confidence in openly addressing any issues that may arise and to look after themselves in the process.

Signs and symptoms



These are some of the signs and symptoms that someone could be suffering with an eating disorder:

- ▶ **Isolating themselves**
- ▶ **Loss of interest in hobbies**
- ▶ **Lack of sleep**
- ▶ **Lack of concentration**
- ▶ **Control over where to eat/fear of eating in front of people**
- ▶ **Low self-esteem**
- ▶ **Signs of perfectionism**
- ▶ **Low mood/irritability/sudden change in personality**



Dealing with eating disorders in the home

As a parent or carer, there are many things you can do to support a loved one during recovery from an eating disorder – even if they are still resisting treatment.



Set a positive example

You have more influence than you think. Instead of dieting, eat nutritious, balanced meals. Be mindful about how you talk about your body and your eating. Avoid self-critical remarks or negative comments about others' appearance. Instead, focus on the qualities on the inside that really make a person attractive.



Make mealtimes fun

Try to eat together as a family as often as possible. Even if your loved one isn't willing to eat the food you've prepared, encourage them to join you at the table. Use this time together to enjoy each other's company, rather than talking about problems. Meals are also a good opportunity to show your loved one that food is something to be enjoyed rather than feared.



In order to be in the best possible place to take care of your loved one, you first need to take care of yourself.

By taking steps to ensure your own wellbeing, not only are you enhancing your capacity as a carer to show support without becoming too easily overwhelmed, you are also modelling to them the importance of self-compassion.



Avoid power struggles over food

Attempts to force your loved one to eat will only cause conflict and bad feelings and can lead to more secrecy and lying. That doesn't mean you can't set appropriate boundaries or hold them accountable, but don't act like the food police, constantly monitoring their behaviour.



Encourage eating with natural consequences

While you can't force healthy eating behaviors, you can encourage them by making the natural consequences of not eating unappealing. For example, if you don't eat, your brain won't have enough energy to learn in their new course they've been excited about, or not eating enough will mean they don't have the strength to play with or take the dog for a walk. Reframe food as being a support for both your body and your mind.



Do whatever you can to promote self-esteem in your loved one

Remind them of their worth outside of their eating disorder. The person you care for and support is not their illness even though it may affect their sense of identity. Remember that they are still the same person they have always been. Separating the person from the illness can be helpful for you and the person you are caring for. This is called externalisation and helps all involved to see the illness as the problem and the person you are caring for as part of the solution. This can be very empowering for everyone involved, as the target of all treatment is the problem not the person.



Don't blame yourself

Parents and carers feel they must take on responsibility for the eating disorder, which is something they truly have no control over. Once you can accept that the eating disorder is not anyone's fault, you can be freed to take action that is honest and not clouded by what you 'should' or 'could' have done.

Supporting a loved one's recovery

Recovering from an eating disorder takes time. There are no quick fixes or miracle cures, so it's important to have patience and compassion. Don't put unnecessary pressure on your loved one by setting unrealistic goals or demanding progress on your own timetable. Provide hope and encouragement, praise each small step forward, and stay positive through struggles and setbacks.



Learn about eating disorders

The more you know, the better equipped you'll be to help your loved one, avoid pitfalls, and cope with challenges.



Listen without judgment

Show that you care by asking about your loved one's feelings and concerns – and then truly listening. Resist the urge to advise or criticize. Simply let your friend or family member know that they're being heard. Even if you don't understand what they're going through, it's important to validate your loved one's feelings.



Be mindful of triggers

Avoid discussions about food, weight, eating or making negative statements about your own body. But don't be afraid to eat normally in front of someone with an eating disorder. It can help set an example of a healthy relationship with food.



Take care of yourself

Don't become so preoccupied with your loved one's eating disorder that you neglect your own needs. Make sure you have your own support, so you can provide it in turn. Whether that support comes from a trusted friend, a support group, or your own therapist, it's important to have an outlet to talk about your feelings and emotionally recharge. It's also important to schedule time into your day for relaxing and doing something you enjoy.

Tips for talking to someone who may be struggling with an eating disorder

If you are worried about someone's eating behaviors or attitudes, it is important to express your concerns in a loving and supportive way. It is also necessary to discuss your worries early on, rather than waiting until they have endured many of the damaging physical and emotional effects of eating disorders.

Approaching the subject of an eating disorder can be a daunting prospect. Remember that recovery is so much more difficult in an atmosphere of secrecy and denial, and the disorder will not go away by itself. Talking about it can be an essential first step.



Set a time to talk

Set aside a time for a private, respectful meeting with them to discuss your concerns openly and honestly in a caring, supportive way. Make sure you will be some place away from other distractions.



Talk to them one-to-one

If other people are around, it can make your loved one feel that you're ganging up on them.



Communicate your concerns

Share your memories of specific times when you felt concerned about their eating or exercise behaviours. Explain that you think these things may indicate that there could be a problem that needs professional attention.





Ask them to explore any concerns raised

They can do this with their GP, counsellor, doctor, nutritionist or any other health professional who is knowledgeable about eating disorders. If you feel comfortable doing so, offer to help them to make an appointment or accompany them on their first visit.



Avoid conflicts or a battle of the wills with them

If they refuse to acknowledge that there is a problem, or give any reason for you to be concerned, restate your feelings and the reasons for them and leave yourself open and available as a supportive listener.



Have some information about eating disorders to hand

They may not feel ready to talk or share with you yet but if they can go away with information to read that helps them to recognise they may need help, they are more likely to come forward when they're ready to ask for support.



Avoid placing shame, blame, or guilt on them regarding their actions or attitudes

Do not use accusatory "you" statements like, "You just need to eat." Or, "You are acting irresponsibly." Instead, use "I" statements. For example: "I'm concerned about you because you refuse to eat breakfast or lunch." Or, "It makes me afraid to hear you vomiting."



Be aware that they're likely to be feeling embarrassed, ashamed and scared

Acknowledge that this must be difficult for them and reassure them that you aren't there to judge, but to support.



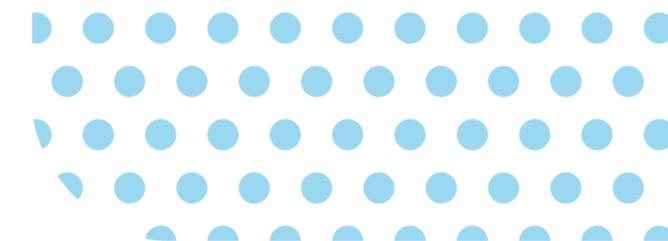
Avoid giving simple solutions

For example, "If you'd just stop, then everything would be fine!"



Express your continued support

Remind them that you care and want them to be healthy and happy.



Talking to young children about eating disorders

When it comes to discussing eating disorders with children, how you approach this will depend on their age and where they are in their emotional, social and cognitive development. However, children are often more observant than adults realise and frequently see what is going on, even if they cannot verbalise it. Acknowledging that something is going on with their loved one's behaviour can validate their emotions and help them feel more safe and secure.

This will depend on their age and where they are in their emotional, social, and cognitive development. There are no formal guidelines on what is best to tell a child and when, so use your best judgment and knowledge of the child.

Some brief statements that might help very young children understand an eating disorder in a friend or family member:



"Mum/dad/sibling has trouble eating properly. We are all working together to help him/her learn to eat better to get healthy. We all need food to help our bodies function properly."



"Mum/dad/sibling gets very frightened and upset at mealtimes. This is not your fault. We hope that this will get easier for them with treatment."



"Having an eating problem can be very scary. It can also be scary when a parent/sibling has an eating problem. Do you have any questions about eating problems? Is there anything you would like to talk about?"



"Your parent's/sibling's eating problem is being helped by grown-ups and doctors. Your job is to be yourself."



"Your parent/sibling is not choosing to act this way. This isn't their fault. It's not your fault. We're all doing the best we can to help them get better."

What to tell an older child?

Older children may have heard of eating disorders and be better able to understand the complexities of what is happening to their loved one. Psychologists recommend keeping the discussions brief and matter-of-fact, while also giving the child a chance to express his/her emotions and concerns about their family member or friend.

Some common questions from children

Children may have questions about eating disorders, just like adults do. Here are some common questions with some sample answers:

What is an eating disorder?

Eating disorders are complex illnesses that make somebody eat too much or too little for a long period of time. They are a coping mechanism in response to things that person is finding difficult in life. Lots of us might eat a little more one day and a little less the next. That's perfectly normal. People with eating disorders do this day after day, and they can't stop even though it's making them sick. That's why your mum/dad/sibling is seeing a doctor: to help get better.

What causes eating disorders?

No one knows for sure. What doctors do know is that people don't choose to have eating disorders. They are normally caused by a combination of biological, psychological and social factors, it's not normally one thing and can happen over time.

Do other people have this problem?

Yes - you and your family member are not alone. Lots of people also have eating problems and there are lots of good doctors and specialists out there who are helping them get well.



Supportive phrases

"You don't have to do this alone. How can I help support you?"

"That sounds really difficult but thank you for sharing with me, I'm really proud of you."

"Your struggles are completely valid, you don't ever need to feel scared or embarrassed to talk to me. I'll never judge you."

"Can you tell me more about how that feels for you?"

"This isn't your fault, you deserve support."

"I may not fully understand but I am here for you and I'm not going anywhere."

"This doesn't define who you are, I believe in you."

"You are so loved and I'm here for you."

Further information and support

If you think that you might have an eating disorder or are worried about your relationship with food, your body image, or your exercise habits, please speak to your GP. It's very important to access treatment as early as possible, as earlier intervention means a greater chance of fully recovering from your eating disorder.

Great organisations for more information:



Providing mental health support across Northern Ireland and specialist eating disorder support for individuals and carers in the Southern HSCT.

amh.org.uk



Supporting individuals and carers across the UK.

beateatingdisorders.org.uk



Helping families fight eating disorders

Supporting carers in NI.

foughted.org



Supporting Individuals and carers in NI.

linkscounselling.com



Supporting men and families in NI.

thelaurenctrust.co.uk

**If you are in crisis, please contact Lifeline on 0808 808 8000
or by Text phone on 18001 0808 808 8000.
Trained counsellors are available by phone 24/7.**

Action Mental Health is a local charity supporting minds and changing lives, across Northern Ireland.

To find out how you can support our vital work through donations and fundraising, or by leaving a gift in your Will, please visit amh.org.uk

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