

EATING DISORDERS

Helpful and Unhelpful Things to Say and Do: GP Edition

As a health professional, what you say matters.

Ensuring a positive experience will make it more likely that a person with an eating disorder will continue to engage in treatment, and importantly, come back for ongoing medical monitoring.

As a general rule, **building rapport and creating a safe and non-judgemental space** will make it easier for people to divulge information about their eating disorder.

Remain **curious** and **empathetic** about the person's experience.

Here are some other ways that you can ensure that a person with an eating disorder has a positive experience during your appointment/s.

It is important to note, however, that these may not be relevant to everyone. The best way to work out what is helpful and what is not, is to ask.

Unhelpful: "Just eat!"

This reinforces that you have little understanding of the person's illness and how difficult it is to overcome. Eating a meal can be incredibly distressing.

Helpful: "I can see that this is a struggle for you, but we're trying to get you to a safe place."

This provides encouragement and support, and shows that you understand how difficult it can be for the person to eat. It also shows that you are on their side and fighting against the eating disorder.

Unhelpful: "If you don't start eating, we'll need to go to the hospital."

Refrain from making threats and taking an authoritative stance. This will only alienate the person.

Helpful: "I know how hard this is for you, but finishing your meals will be a great step towards getting better and showing the eating disorder that you are in charge."

This puts the control and power in the hands of your loved one and links it to their goals. It can also provide hope.

Unhelpful: "Have you been vomiting again?"

Refrain from blaming and pointing fingers. This will only result in the people feeling shameful and isolating themselves.

Helpful: "I've noticed that you are struggling with purging again. Is there something I can do to help?"

This shows you are aware of the behaviour and willing to give support. It puts the power in the person's hands.

Unhelpful: "You don't look that sick." "You look healthy/good/well." "You look so much better."

Any comment about body, weight or shape can fire up the eating disorder. They can interpret the comments to mean they have gained weight or they are not sick enough.

Helpful: Try not to make comments about physical appearance.

This emphasises the importance of appearance. It will almost always be misinterpreted and can trigger their eating disorder regardless of good intentions.

Unhelpful: "I need an eating disorder to get rid of these extra kilos." "I wish I could lose weight like you."

This is insensitive and highlights your lack of understanding of the horrors of an eating disorder. These types of comments glamorise and idealise the illness. No one chooses to have an eating disorder. Keep in mind the high rate of mortality and suicide in people with eating disorders.

Helpful: Refrain from making comments about the person's weight or appearance.

Try not to make comments about your own weight, diet or exercise also. Regardless of your good intentions this will only trigger the eating disorder.

Unhelpful: "Looks like you've gained some weight! That's fantastic!"

Focusing on weight gain can make the person feel like weight is the only thing that matters. This is likely to make them feel like you do not understand their struggle.

Helpful: Refrain from making comments about the person's weight.

Focus on other areas of progress instead, such as strengthening friendships and freedom in food choices.

Unhelpful: "I don't understand why your treatment team won't let you exercise." "I can't believe your Dietitian makes you eat that. It can't be healthy!"

Questioning the person's treatment will compromise their trust in their treating team. This can lead them to refuse to follow treatment recommendations.

Helpful: "Your team know what is right for you - they are the experts!" "Your doctors have the expertise and know how to help you recover."

Refrain from making comments about food and your own food preferences. Always support the decisions of the treating team. Show that you are all a united front in fighting against the eating disorder.

Unhelpful: "We don't know what to do with you anymore." "All this treatment isn't working."

Recovery can take years. Living with someone with an eating disorder can be very tiring. Take care of yourself so that you can best support your loved one.

Helpful: It is important to always hold hope for recovery.

Most people with an eating disorder question whether recovery is possible. It is! Encourage them to keep fighting!

Unhelpful: Ignoring small progress.

Ignoring small steps forward can be interpreted that only full recovery is acceptable. This can feel unachievable and can result in the person stepping backwards.

Helpful: Acknowledge small achievements.

It is important to acknowledge small steps forward. This might include eating more or different foods, being more engaged in conversation, attending appointments and trying to meet a treatment goal.

Helpful: At all stages of treatment the person should be encouraged to ask questions and to express his or her thoughts and feelings.

Examples of questions that will help you understand the person's perceptions:

"You say that you are experiencing symptoms such as abdominal pain, loss of energy, difficulty concentrating. What do you think might be causing these symptoms?"

"Do you feel that you could control your eating disorder behaviours if you wanted to? For example, could you go back to eating normal, regular meals from today?"

"What do you see as being the ideal solution to the problem?"