

Self-Care for Families and Carers

Supporting someone with an eating disorder is a huge responsibility and can come with considerable personal strain. You may start to fear and dread mealtimes or feel like the eating disorder has taken over your life, leaving no time for the things you enjoy.

Research shows that people who support or care for a person with a mental illness can be at risk of developing mental health problems (Shah et al, 2010). The practical and emotional demands of supporting a loved one with an eating disorder can be immense at times, so it is important to think about your own wellbeing too.

If you are caring for someone with an eating disorder it is possible that at times you may feel:

- Anger, distress and frustration about what is happening to the person you care for, and how this is affecting you and your family.
- Anxious and afraid about the physical and psychological changes you see in you loved one.
- Worn out from the extra demands of supporting someone through treatment, as well as keeping on top of family life and work commitments.
- Guilty about your 'role' in the illness. It is very common to fear that you are in some way responsible for causing or influencing the disorder, or that you did something wrong.
- Confused about the best way to help.
- Helpless and hopeless about your ability to provide support, or whether the support you can give is enough.
- Frustrated or upset because you cannot fix the problem quickly.
- Aggravated because you cannot access the type of help from health professionals that you think you or the person needs.
- Fearful that the person may get worse, self-harm, or contemplate suicide.

Remember: These are all valid and normal feelings experienced by families, friends, and carers.

Importance of Looking After Yourself

The most important thing you can do for the person you are supporting is to look after yourself. As with any other stressful time it is essential you look after your emotional and physical health.

When there are a lot of demands for your time, it can be important to find the right balance between how much you can offer to others and how much you need to look after yourself.



Make Time for Yourself

It is important to take regular short breaks as well as scheduling time just for yourself. Make a list of activities you enjoy and make time for them (e.g. watching a movie, playing sport, gardening, catching up with a friend).

"I went for a daily walk. It was good to get some fresh air and a fresh perspective. I would have been no good to anyone without time to myself. They were purely for my own wellbeing."

- Brenda, carer

Keeping Healthy

It can be difficult to manage extra demands if you are not paying attention to your own health. Looking after your physical and mental health will have a positive impact on how you think and feel.

- Eat a balanced and healthy diet
- Reduce alcohol and other drugs
- Exercise regularly
- Make sure you get enough sleep and rest
- Make time for relaxation or mindfulness

Seek Support

You may find there are times when you are completely overwhelmed. It may be helpful to seek professional help for your own psychological and emotional wellbeing. This will help you work through any issues you are experiencing in your role supporting someone with an eating disorder, which will in turn will help you support the person more effectively

“Having a child going through an eating disorder was so isolating at times. People don’t understand and they don’t know what to say - so they don’t say anything at all, which can make you feel very much alone.”

- Grant, parent

Just as the person you care for will need a strong support network, so will you. Some people find it helpful to link with others who have had similar experiences.

Think about people in your life who are good listeners and understand you, and make sure you schedule time with them. Consider joining a face-to-face or online support network to share your experiences with others.

To find a support group near you, go to our website: www.insideoutinstitute.org.au



Shah, A.J., Wadoo, O., & Latoo, J. (2010). Psychological Stress in Carers of People with Mental Disorders. *British Journal of Medical Practitioners*, 3(3), a327