

Supporting Someone with an Eating Disorder

The effects of an eating disorder can have a significant impact on family and friends. Supporting someone with an eating disorder can be challenging, but your involvement can make a big difference in their recovery.

Here are some ways you can support someone getting treatment:

Help the person stay connected with you and other family and friends. A person experiencing an eating disorder can feel very isolated and alone, so it can be really important for them to participate in usual activities as much as possible while being treated for an eating disorder.

Encourage the person to talk about their feelings. Use open questions, such as “How are you feeling?” Try to listen to their answer without judging or interrupting, even if you do not agree with some of what they say.

Encourage the person to talk about other parts of their life as much as possible. Do not focus all conversations on the eating disorder or treatment plan.

Tell the person that you care about them and will try to support them through their recovery journey.

Include the person in invitations and usual group activities just as you would have done before the eating disorder. Do not be discouraged if they choose not to get involved. Keep asking – it means a lot.

Be a voice of encouragement. When the person seems tired of the fight to recover, remind them of all the positive things that come from recovery. You can talk about things they used to enjoy, and will be able to do again, once they are healthy and well. It is also important to remind them about the hurdles they have already overcome.

Discourage negative self-talk by distracting them with other subjects and reminding them of their achievements and progress.

Stay positive and remind the person that recovery is possible.

Suggest calm distractions. Watch a television show or a movie together. This can also be helpful after they have eaten a meal or snack, to distract them from the discomfort of eating or the thoughts to compensate.

Separate the person from the illness. Talk about the eating disorder as the problem - not the person.

“When the eating disorder was really bad, I would scream and argue with my parents about anything to do with food. But after I started treatment, I learnt to express my feelings better without it ending in a fight”

- Judy, 14

Avoid the following as much as possible:

- Getting drawn into conversations about food, weight, or shape. Instead, say “Let’s not talk about those things, since there is no right answer”.
- Being critical or using negative words to describe the person or their behaviours.
- Trying to solve their problems for them.
- Giving simple solutions to overcoming problems. For example, saying “All you need to do is eat”.
- Making generalisations such as “never” or “always” when talking about the person or their behaviour.
- Talking about appearance. Compliments about appearance can be misinterpreted by the person. I.e., “You look so well” can be taken to mean “I’m fat”.

Tips for Parents

It is difficult to manage the dual roles of parenting and supporting a child with an eating disorder. The experience will impact the whole family and can be stressful.

Communicate openly

- Involve everyone in the immediate family from the beginning. Explain what is happening and maintain open, compassionate communication.

- Work together as a family. This will provide support for the child, and it will also keep all family members included in the process.
- It is important for adults in the child's life to deliver consistent messages and follow the same rules. Present a united front against the eating disorder.
- Consider who else in the child's life may need to know what is happening (e.g. school staff, parents of close friends, sports coaches).

Get informed

- Seek reliable information from health professionals and reliable resources to equip yourself for the support role.

Role model healthy behaviours

- Role model healthy behaviours and attitudes towards food, weight, exercise and body image. This includes refraining from making any comments on such subjects, implementing healthy eating habits without restrictions, and incorporating balanced exercise.
- Work closely with the treatment team and support your child to follow treatment plans.

Consider siblings

- Siblings play an important role in supporting the person with an eating disorder. However, siblings will also need time to focus on their own interests and developmental needs.
- Spend one-on-one time with siblings and reassure them that you are still available to give them support and parent them. Resentment can build up if siblings feel ignored or isolated.
- Reinforcing general household rules can demonstrate equality for all children at a time when it can appear that all attention is on the child with the eating disorder.

Remember: There is no set time for how long recovery will take. Sometimes it might feel like recovery is an impossible task. Be assured that recovery is definitely possible with the right treatment and a high level of commitment.

Help your child separate themselves from the illness

- In addition to supporting your child to adhere to their treatment plan, help your child to build their self-esteem and separate themselves from the illness.
- Pay attention to other aspects of your child's life and stay focused on their long-term needs and health.

Seek support for yourself

- Get support from your social network and seek professional help, if needed. Caring for someone with an eating disorder can be extremely stressful. Looking after yourself will help you to be more effective in your role as a parent and support person.
- Clinicians experienced in working with individuals with eating disorders and their families will also be able to support you on this journey.

"Our family went to counselling to help support each other. I remember in one session my son opened up to his sister about how scared he was she was going to die. That really shocked her and helped her to understand how worried we all were."
- Brian, father