

Supporting a Loved One with an Eating Disorder

A Compassionate Guide for Family and Friends

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Introduction

Learning that someone you love is struggling with an eating disorder can be overwhelming, frightening, and confusing. You may feel helpless, unsure of what to say or do, or worried about making things worse. These feelings are completely normal.

This guide is designed to help you understand eating disorders better and provide practical ways to support your loved one through their recovery journey. Remember: you don't have to be perfect, and you don't have to have all the answers. Your love, patience, and willingness to learn can make a meaningful difference.

Understanding Eating Disorders

Eating disorders are serious mental health conditions that affect a person's relationship with food, eating, body image, and exercise. They are NOT about vanity, attention-seeking, or a lack of willpower. Eating disorders are complex conditions influenced by genetic, biological, psychological, and sociocultural factors.

Common Types Include:

- **Anorexia Nervosa:** Restriction of food intake, intense fear of weight gain, distorted body image
- **Bulimia Nervosa:** Cycles of binge eating followed by compensatory behaviors (purging, excessive exercise)
- **Binge Eating Disorder:** Recurrent episodes of eating large amounts of food with feelings of loss of control
- **ARFID:** Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder, not related to body image concerns
- **OSFED:** Other Specified Feeding or Eating Disorder (atypical presentations that are equally serious)

Important Facts:

- Eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any mental illness
- They affect people of all genders, ages, races, body sizes, and socioeconomic backgrounds
- You cannot tell if someone has an eating disorder by looking at them
- Recovery is possible with appropriate treatment and support

What NOT to Do or Say

While your intentions may be good, certain comments and behaviors can be harmful or trigger the eating disorder. Here are common pitfalls to avoid:

■ Don't Comment on Appearance

- Avoid: "You look so healthy!" "Have you gained/lost weight?" "You're looking better!"
- Why: Comments about appearance reinforce the focus on body and can be triggering
- Even positive comments about appearance can backfire

■ Don't Police Their Eating

- Avoid: Monitoring their plate, commenting on portion sizes, forcing them to eat
- Avoid: "Is that all you're eating?" "Should you really be eating that?"
- Why: This creates power struggles and increases shame

■ Don't Make It About Food or Weight

- Avoid: "Just eat!" "If you'd just gain/lose weight, you'd be fine"
- Avoid: Talking about diets, calories, or your own body concerns around them
- Why: Eating disorders are about much more than food—they're coping mechanisms

■ Don't Minimize or Dismiss

- Avoid: "You don't look like you have an eating disorder" "It's just a phase"
- Avoid: "Just think positive" "Other people have it worse"
- Why: This invalidates their experience and discourages them from seeking help

■ Don't Try to Fix or Control

- Avoid: Taking over their recovery, forcing solutions, being the "food police"
- Why: Recovery must come from within; you can support but not control

What TO Do: Helpful Ways to Support

Supporting someone with an eating disorder requires patience, compassion, and education. Here are evidence-based ways to help:

✓ Educate Yourself

- Learn about eating disorders from reputable sources
- Understand that recovery is not linear—expect ups and downs
- Recognize that eating disorders are not a choice

✓ Express Concern Without Judgment

- Choose a private, calm moment to talk
- Use "I" statements: "I'm worried about you" instead of "You need to..."
- Focus on behaviors and feelings, not appearance: "I've noticed you seem sad lately"
- Be prepared that they may deny the problem or get defensive

✓ Listen Without Trying to Fix

- Create a safe space for them to share their feelings
- Validate their emotions: "That sounds really difficult"
- Avoid giving advice unless they specifically ask for it
- **Simply being present and listening can be incredibly healing**

✓ Encourage Professional Help

- Offer to help them find a therapist, dietitian, or treatment program
- Offer to go with them to appointments if they'd like support
- Understand that they may resist treatment at first
- If they're a minor or in immediate danger, you may need to seek help on their behalf

✓ Support Their Treatment

- Respect their privacy and treatment process
- Follow guidance from their treatment team
- Attend family therapy sessions if invited
- Be patient—recovery takes time, often years

✓ Create a Supportive Environment

- Avoid diet talk, body comments, and food moralizing in your home

- Model balanced eating and positive body image yourself
- Keep mealtimes as stress-free and normal as possible
- Remove scales and triggering materials from shared spaces

✓ **Focus on the Person, Not the Disorder**

- Maintain your relationship beyond the eating disorder
- Do activities together that aren't food-related
- Remind them of their strengths and qualities beyond appearance
- Talk about topics other than the eating disorder

Helpful Things to Say

Sometimes it's hard to know what to say. Here are some validating, supportive phrases:

- *"I'm here for you, no matter what."*
- *"I can see you're struggling, and I care about you."*
- *"You don't have to go through this alone."*
- *"How can I best support you right now?"*
- *"Recovery is possible, and I believe in you."*
- *"I'm proud of you for fighting this."*
- *"It's okay to have hard days. Recovery isn't linear."*
- *"Your worth isn't determined by your appearance."*
- *"I love you for who you are, not what you look like."*
- *"What you're feeling is valid."*

When to Seek Immediate Help

Some situations require immediate professional intervention. Seek emergency help if your loved one:

- **Has suicidal thoughts or plans they may follow through on (it is helpful to ask direct questions)**
- **Shows signs of severe medical complications (fainting, heart irregularities, extreme weakness)**
- **Is rapidly losing weight or refusing all food/fluids**
- **Is engaging in dangerous purging behaviors multiple times daily**
- **Has significant changes in mental status or consciousness**

Crisis Resources:

- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 988
- Crisis Text Line: Text "NEDA" to 741741
- National Eating Disorders Association Helpline: 1-800-931-2237
- Emergency Services: 911

Taking Care of Yourself

Supporting someone with an eating disorder can be emotionally draining. You cannot pour from an empty cup—taking care of yourself is essential, not selfish.

Self-Care Strategies:

- **Set boundaries:** You can be supportive without sacrificing your own wellbeing
- **Seek your own support:** Consider therapy or support groups for families
- **Maintain your own life:** Continue your hobbies, friendships, and routines
- **Process your emotions:** It's okay to feel frustrated, scared, or helpless
- **Remember:** You're not responsible for their recovery
- **Celebrate small wins:** Recovery progress may be slow, but every step matters

Support for Supporters:

- Family-Based Treatment (FBT) programs for parents of adolescents
- F.E.A.S.T. (Families Empowered and Supporting Treatment of Eating Disorders)
- National Alliance for Eating Disorders support groups
- Individual therapy to process your own emotions and stress

Hope for Recovery

Recovery from an eating disorder is absolutely possible. While the journey can be long and challenging, many people do recover and go on to live full, meaningful lives. Your support can be a crucial part of that recovery.

Recovery looks different for everyone and isn't always linear. There may be setbacks, but these don't mean failure. Each day in recovery is a victory, no matter how small it may seem.

Your loved one is more than their eating disorder. Continue to see them as a whole person—their hopes, dreams, personality, and strengths exist beyond this illness. Hold space for both the struggle and the person they are becoming in recovery.

Additional Resources

Organizations:

- National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA): nationaleatingdisorders.org
- F.E.A.S.T.: feast-ed.org
- National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders: anad.org
- The Emily Program: emilyprogram.com

Books for Supporters:

- "Help Your Teenager Beat an Eating Disorder" by James Lock and Daniel Le Grange
- "When Your Teen Has an Eating Disorder" by Lauren Muhlheim
- "Loving Someone with an Eating Disorder" by Dana Harron
- "Sick Enough" by Jennifer L. Gaudiani

Final Thoughts

Thank you for taking the time to educate yourself and for your commitment to supporting your loved one. Your care and compassion matter more than you may realize. Remember to be patient—with them and with yourself. Recovery is a journey, not a destination.

For more resources and support, visit:

beyondeatingrecovery.com/resources

You are not alone in this.