



TALKING ABOUT EATING DISORDERS

Dear Parents, Family Members, and Friends,

You are often the first ones to notice the changes in thinking and behavior when someone is experiencing an eating disorder. Nearly 30 million people will develop an eating disorder in their lifetime, and family and friends can also be impacted.

Eating disorders are not a choice or anyone's fault, and they cannot be "willed away." They are complex mental and physical illnesses that often coexist with other mental health concerns and require treatment. We wouldn't ignore a broken bone and hope it would heal on its own. Similarly, choosing to intervene when someone has an eating disorder can change the course of their illness and lead to improved health outcomes.

We understand that this may be a difficult time for you. It can feel overwhelming when someone you care about is struggling with a challenging illness. Please know that there is help available for you too, and that your needs will be different from your loved one's as they get help. It's ok, and often vital, to seek help for yourself as you support them.

By reading this information, you are taking an invaluable step toward helping your loved one. Your consistency, compassion, and commitment will support them as they begin to build recovery-oriented eating patterns, develop coping skills, and move toward wellness. Remember, recovery is a journey, and your caring presence ensures that they do not travel alone.

With hope,



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RECOGNIZING EATING DISORDERS

If you're concerned a loved one may have an eating disorder, early recognition and treatment can improve their chances of recovery. The signs listed below may indicate they have an eating disorder, but aren't exhaustive. Even if your loved one doesn't show any of these specific signs, it's still important to talk with them or seek professional guidance if you're concerned. Learn more about eating disorders and their symptoms here:

nationaleatingdisorders.org/what-are-eating-disorders

Emotional and Behavioral Signs

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Changes in eating behaviors
(e.g., refuses to eat certain foods, develops food rituals, eats in secret, etc.)• Preoccupation with weight loss, food, calories, and dieting• Makes excuses to avoid mealtimes or situations involving food• Will only eat certain textures of food• Feels out of control and/or shame when eating• Fears of choking or vomiting• Withdraws from friends and previously pleasurable activities | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Becomes more isolated and secretive• Extreme concern with body size and shape• Frequent checking in the mirror for perceived flaws in appearance• Extreme mood swings• Excessive exercise or other behaviors to “compensate” for eating
(e.g., self-induced vomiting, misuse of laxatives etc.) |
|---|--|

“If you're concerned a loved one may have an eating disorder, early recognition and treatment can improve their chances of recovery.”

Physical Signs

- Noticeable fluctuations in weight, both up and down
- Stomach cramps
- Menstrual irregularities
- Difficulties concentrating
- Abnormal laboratory findings
- Dizziness, especially upon standing
- Fainting/syncope
- Feeling cold all the time
- Sleep problems
- Cuts/calluses across the top of finger joints (a result of inducing vomiting)
- Dental problems
- Dry skin and hair, and brittle nails
- Fine hair on body (lanugo)
- Muscle weakness
- Cold, mottled hands and feet or swelling of feet
- Poor wound healing
- Impaired immune functioning





HOW TO HELP YOUR LOVED ONE

Talking to a Loved One About Eating Disorder Concerns

It's not always easy to discuss eating concerns, especially with someone you're close to. However, family and friends can play a critical role in recognizing symptoms and encouraging the person struggling to seek help. Here are a few tips on how you can talk to your loved one about eating disorder concerns:

- **Learn about eating disorders.**
Educate yourself about the myths and stereotypes. Knowing about the facts can help you reason with your loved one.
- **Rehearse what you want to say.**
Write out your thoughts or role-play with a trusted person.
- **Establish a safe space.**
Make sure you set a time to discuss your concerns in a private place.
- **Use “I” statements.**
Stick to the facts. Share behaviors you've personally observed, such as: “I have noticed that you aren't eating dinner with us anymore,” or “I am worried about how frequently you are going to the gym.” It's easy to sound accusatory (“You're not eating! You're exercising too much!”), which can cause a person to feel defensive. Instead, stick to pointing out what you've observed. If you can, also point out behaviors not related to eating and weight, which may be easier for the person to see and accept.
- **Emphasize the importance of seeking professional help.** You are not expected to have all the answers, and involving professionals early can improve a person's chances of recovery.
- **Be caring, but firm.**
Avoid making promises such as you won't tell anyone. You may need to speak with others to help ensure that your loved one is getting the help and support they need.
- **Avoid overly simplistic solutions.**
These can reinforce myths about eating disorders. It isn't helpful to say “just stop” or “just start eating more” — eating disorders are complex issues.
- **Be prepared for negative reactions.**
Individuals may react differently, such as being relieved, defensive, angry, or brush off your concerns. These responses are normal. Reiterate your concerns, let them know you care, and leave the conversation open.
- **Remove potential stigma.**
Let your loved one know it's okay to admit to struggling with an eating disorder. It's not a choice — many people will be diagnosed and can recover.

“Reconnecting your loved one to their values and what they want to do in life can help them focus on the long-term benefits of recovery.”



Encouraging a Loved One to Seek Treatment

The recommended strategy to deal with an eating disorder is to seek professional help. This may seem straightforward, but it can be stressful and challenging. Here are some tips to support your loved one with taking this step:

- **Ask if they want help finding a professional and making an appointment.**

Some individuals may find it less anxiety-provoking if someone else sets up the first appointment or goes with them to discuss a potential eating disorder.

- **Complete a Medical Evaluation.**

Eating disorders can cause serious health issues. It's important that your loved one visits a medical provider regularly to ensure their health isn't at immediate risk. Keep in mind that lab results may appear normal even if the person is physically struggling, so it's important not to rely on blood tests alone.

- **Find the Right Professional.**

If the first therapist doesn't seem like a good fit, encourage your loved one to keep looking. It can sometimes take several tries to find the right person, so it's important to ask questions and explore different options.

To learn more about treatment and how to find a provider for your loved one, check out our companion guide [“All About Eating Disorders Treatment.”](#)

- **Join with the part of them that wants to get well.**

Many individuals may be hesitant to change their behaviors. Focusing on the social, emotional, or physical effects of the eating disorder that they're more willing to acknowledge can help encourage them to consider treatment.

- **Remind the person why they want to get well.**

Reconnecting your loved one with their values and what they want to do in life can help them focus on the long-term benefits of recovery. You might ask questions like, “What are your goals?” (For example, they may want to travel, go to college, or participate in a sport).

- **Find a middle ground between forcing the issue and ignoring it.**

If you become overly combative about seeking help, your loved one may start to avoid you. However, you don't want to ignore a potentially life-threatening illness. It's not easy to find a middle ground, but regularly checking in with your loved one about how they're doing, how they would like to be supported, and if they are willing to seek treatment can help nudge them in the right direction.

How to Help a Loved One Who Refuses Treatment

Helping a loved one who is experiencing an eating disorder can be highly emotional and painful, and can present some very difficult challenges, especially when they refuse treatment or deny that there is a problem. For some people, the reality of their eating disorder is not obvious. For others, what to do about it may not be obvious, or they may feel torn between recovery and the overwhelming fear of letting go of the eating disorder.

The first step is to start by just talking with your loved one in a direct and caring way. Even if you don't feel the discussion was well-received or that you got through to your loved one, don't lose hope. You shared your concern and let them know that you care and are there for them. You may also have planted a seed that they should seek help. The seed may not take root immediately, but over time, the concern of family and friends can help move an individual towards recovery.

“The first step is to start by just talking with your loved one in a direct and caring way.”



Involuntary Commitment

If your loved one's eating disorder is life-threatening and they continue to refuse treatment, more urgent measures may be necessary—but only as a last resort when all other avenues have been exhausted. Civil commitment, more commonly known as involuntary commitment, is a legal process by which an adult with symptoms of a serious mental disorder is involuntarily committed to a psychiatric hospital for treatment. Parents of children under the age of 18 can often require that their child's eating disorder be treated without any legal process, even if the child doesn't buy into the idea that treatment is necessary.

It can be confusing and difficult to decide whether it is time to seek involuntary commitment for a loved one who has an eating disorder. However, when someone with a severe and life-threatening eating disorder is in denial about the seriousness of their illness and refuses treatment, involuntary commitment may help them receive the treatment they need. If you are considering involuntary treatment, it is important to consult with medical professionals (e.g. physicians, mental health professionals, treatment providers, etc.) to determine next steps. You can learn more about the process of involuntary treatment and find resources here:

[NationalEatingDisorders.org/involuntary-commitment](https://www.NationalEatingDisorders.org/involuntary-commitment)





RECOVERY TOOLS

Meal Support: A Key Part of Recovery

Changing eating patterns is one of the most challenging aspects of recovering from an eating disorder. Support from family members and caregivers is essential in helping a loved one establish recovery-focused eating patterns without relying on disordered behaviors such as restricting, binge eating, or using compensatory behaviors. Meal support involves actively encouraging and guiding a loved one to complete a meal or snack in a way that aligns with recovery goals and fosters healing.

Why Is Meal Support Important?

Individuals with eating disorders often have deeply ingrained, maladaptive eating patterns that are difficult to change. Just as children learn to eat by observing others, those in recovery can benefit from the positive examples set by supportive caregivers. By eating with a loved one and providing meal support, caregivers model recovery-oriented attitudes toward food and offer steady support during meals and snacks. Meal support is also an opportunity for caregivers to provide important feedback and to assist their loved one in using coping strategies before, during, and after meals.

When providing meal support, caregivers can focus on these key qualities:

**Stay
CALM**

Manage your own emotions to create a supportive environment for your loved one.

**Be
CONFIDENT**

Demonstrate belief in the value and effectiveness of meal support in promoting recovery.

**Stay
CONSISTENT**

Maintain clear expectations around meals and snacks.

**Lead with
COMPASSION**

Your calm, patient, and non-judgmental presence during meals can be incredibly comforting. Showing curiosity and understanding, especially in difficult moments, helps foster a safe environment for your loved one's recovery journey.

The treatment team will provide specific guidance on meal support, but here are some general tips to help you get started:

Preparation for Meal Support

✓ **Establish regular meal and snack times.**

A consistent schedule can create a sense of stability and predictability.

✓ **Plan for occasional changes.**

Sometimes meal or snack times will need to shift; prepare ahead to ensure your loved one's needs are still met.

✓ **Discuss meal/snack challenges and how best to provide reassurance.**

Work with your loved one to identify specific ways you can support them:

- For example, they might say, “*When you see/hear me, please _____.*”
- You could ask, “*How can I encourage you during or after a meal?*”
- Identify topics to avoid during meals, like the nutritional content of foods (e.g., calories, fat, carbs), weight, shape, appearance, or emotionally charged topics.

✓ **Make your home a diet-culture-free zone.**

Removing foods labeled as “low-calorie,” “low-carb,” or “low-fat” can help reduce triggers and reinforce a recovery-focused environment.

✓ **Use skills to reduce pre-meal anxiety.**

Practice calming techniques or grounding exercises before meals to help ease tension.

✓ **Plan support for after meals/snacks**

when urges for compensatory behaviors, like exercise or purging, may be strong.



During a Meal/Snack

✓ Eat together, serving the same meal to each person.

While each family member may require different portion sizes to meet their unique needs, sharing the same foods can help model recovery-oriented eating, support social eating skills, and normalize a variety of foods.

✓ Provide positive affirmations

to encourage your loved one during the meal. For example:

- *“I love how you choose (insert loved one’s goal that is not eating related) by facing your eating challenges.”*
- *“You are so brave; how can I support you more?”*

✓ Use agreed-upon prompts

to help them manage urges, fears, or difficult emotions.

- For example, you might say: *“What could I say to help you when you’re feeling [insert urge, fear, or emotion here]?”* If they respond with something like *“Remind me that I want to be able to attend summer camp,”* you can follow through by saying something like: *“It looks like this meal is challenging for you. Let’s work through it together so you can get closer to your summer camp goal.”*
- *“Please fill in the sentence for me so I know how to best prompt you when things are hard: ‘When I _____; say _____.’”*

✓ Encourage the use of coping skills

and be a gentle guide through the process.

✓ Stay calm, confident, consistent, and lead with compassion.

Your steady presence can create a sense of safety.

✓ Use mindfulness to stay present

and support your loved one in focusing on the meal.

- *“Let’s focus on what we need to do at this meal.”*

✓ Introduce gentle distractions

if they become highly overwhelmed—simple word games, light conversation starters, or calming music can offer relief.

After a Meal/Snack

✓ Engage in post-meal activities

that can help prevent compensatory behaviors, like playing a game, journaling, watching a TV show, listening to music, or doing a creative activity together.

✓ Plan a later time to check in

on how the meal support went and discuss any adjustments for future meals.

✓ Share observed patterns

with the treatment team to help them fine-tune the support plan.

Meal Support Resources

Kelty Eating Disorders:

- keltyeatingdisorders.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Meal-Support-at-a-Glance_2022.pdf
- youtube.com/watch?v=pPSLdUUITWE

Dr. Lauren Mulheim

- youtube.com/watch?v=vP8k_7L2gSQ
- eatingdisordertherapy.ca/the-importance-of-meal-support-in-eating-disorder-recovery

NEDA

- nationaleatingdisorders.org/why-community-is-not-only-helpful-in-eating-disorder-recovery-its-essential





SELF-CARE FOR CAREGIVERS

Being a caregiver for an individual with an eating disorder is not always an easy task. Your primary goal is to look after that person and provide them with an infinite amount of care, love, and support. It's important to remember that caregivers also need support and to practice self-care. When you need to take time for yourself, here are a few ways to implement the practice of self-care into your daily routine:

Self-Care Tips

- **Check in with yourself.**

Caring for someone with an eating disorder can be overwhelming, so regularly assess your own well-being. Journaling can help you reflect on your thoughts and feelings.

- **Prioritize self-care.**

Taking time for yourself isn't selfish—it's essential. Set aside an hour each day, say "no" when needed, and limit extra responsibilities to protect your energy.

- **Maintain relationships.**

Stay connected with loved ones through daily conversations, quality time, and affectionate moments. Seeking support from family, friends, or professionals can ease the caregiving journey.

- **Ask for help.**

You don't have to do this alone. Whether it's guidance, emotional support, or assistance with daily tasks, accepting help strengthens both you and those who care about you.

- **Be kind to yourself.**

Mistakes happen—they're part of learning and growing. Aim for progress, not perfection, and allow yourself to laugh when possible.

- **Step outside.**

A short walk, fresh air, and sunlight can help refresh your mind and remind you that there's more to life than daily challenges.

- **Limit media intake.**

Social media and news can be overwhelming, often spreading negativity and unrealistic comparisons. Taking a break allows you to reset.

- **Explore your options.**

If you need time off work for caregiving, learn about available resources like the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA): dol.gov/agencies/whd/fmla.

Support Groups for Caregivers

If you're supporting a person who is experiencing an eating disorder, it is important for you to have your own place to receive support. You can find support groups here: www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/resources-for-loved-ones

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