
A GUIDE FOR WHEN A FAMILY MEMBER HAS AN EATING DISORDER

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National Eating Disorder Information Centre

www.nedic.ca

WHAT CAUSES AN EATING DISORDER?

There is no singular cause of an eating disorder. The development of an eating disorder cannot be attributed to a specific person, event, or gene. Eating disorders are complex illnesses that are best understood as the outcome of the interaction of multiple biological, psychological, and sociocultural factors. Risk factors include genetic vulnerability/family history, body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, perfectionism, predisposition to experiencing negative emotions, dieting, and facing stigmatization based on one's weight.

Eating disorders can seriously affect physical and psychological health and functioning. Their impacts can show up at school, at work, and in relationships. The earlier your family member gets appropriate help, the better their chances for full recovery. However, it's also important to recognize that because the eating disorder may serve an important function in their life, your family member may not see things the way you do. They may not even recognize that they are ill, as severe malnutrition can impact one's self-perception and ability to think clearly. You and your family member may have different ideas about which next steps are best.

CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS VERSUS ADULTS IN TREATMENT

As a parent or caregiver of a child or adolescent, you have responsibilities and direct involvement in treatment. An eating disorder can compromise many aspects of their development. You have the right and responsibility to seek help and enroll your child in treatment, even if they don't believe they need help. Family involvement in the treatment of children and adolescents is extremely helpful and highly encouraged – research shows that it can significantly increase the chances of early and full recovery. In contrast, an adult living with an eating disorder typically can only access treatment if they enter voluntarily. As a family member of an adult, while you might not participate in treatment in the way that you would if they were younger, you can still play a meaningful role in helping them recover.

BEFORE APPROACHING YOUR FAMILY MEMBER

- Become informed. Learn about eating disorders – the more you know, the more supportive you can be. Find out what help is available for your family member based on their age, location, financial means, and symptoms. See www.nedic.ca for information and resources.
- Remind yourself that your family member is not their eating disorder. It's normal to experience fear, anger, resentment, impatience, and confusion when facing the beliefs and behaviours of someone with an eating disorder. Eating disorders tend to create negative and destructive thinking patterns and can cause affected individuals to act in ways that are out of character for them. Your family member's belief that they can recover – and that it's a good idea to try to recover – may be weakened. They need your help and empathy in separating the ruthless voice of the eating disorder from their natural, healthy responses and wishes.
- Understand that your family member may not welcome your concern when you first approach them, and may even react with anger or denial. Shame, fear, and ambivalence about the eating disorder and about recovery are common. Keep in mind that they may not even be aware that they are ill.
- Be prepared. There is a possibility that, despite the effects of the eating disorder, and your concern, your family member may not be ready – or able – to let go of the disordered eating because they see it as providing positive outcomes. This does not mean that you have to give up trying to help, but it does mean that your approach may have to change.

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TIPS FOR APPROACHING YOUR FAMILY MEMBER

Communication is key:

- Find an appropriate time and place to talk, e.g., somewhere private and comfortable, and not during a meal.
- Let your loved one know that you are concerned about their overall well-being and want to help.
- Keep the focus on your concerns about what you have observed, e.g. specific behaviours, and the negative impact of their behaviours on aspects of their life, such as health, relationships, and academic, social, and employment activities.
- Avoid talking about your own appearance or focusing on your loved one's appearance.
- Speak in a way that respects and validates your loved one and their emotions and experiences, while not condoning the eating disorder behaviours.
- Be patient. Don't be discouraged if your loved one at first reacts with anger or denial. There is a lot of shame and pain associated with eating disorders, and change – even positive change – takes time. The disorder and the behaviours serve a purpose for your loved one, although it might be hard to understand what that purpose is.
- Be compassionate. Eating disorders are complicated illnesses, and the food, weight, and body image issues are symptoms of deeply-experienced distress. Try to recognize that your loved one would prefer to have healthier coping mechanisms; however, they are doing the best they can for now.
- Be non-judgmental. Unfortunately, eating disorders are stigmatized, which increases feelings of isolation and reduces self-esteem. Many individuals hide their problem to avoid the associated stigma. Create an environment free of judgment and criticism of your loved one as a person. This will help them feel more secure and better able to acknowledge and deal with the eating disorder.

TIPS FOR SUPPORTING YOUR FAMILY MEMBER

- Avoid commenting on weight or appearance – theirs or others'. Your loved one is already overly focused on their body and how it compares to others'. Such remarks, even if intended to be complimentary, will validate unhelpful beliefs they may have about physical appearance being a reflection of a person's worth.
- Examine your own attitudes about food, weight, size, and shape. What biases might you have and how might you be conveying them to others? How do these impact your own well-being?
- Find motivating reasons for your loved one to get help and make positive health-related changes.
- Be encouraging. Foster their confidence in their ability to fully recover.
- Affirm their qualities and abilities that are unrelated to food or physical appearance, e.g., remind them that they are intelligent, funny, competent, and that they are more than their eating disorder. Acknowledge and celebrate any healthy changes in thinking or behaviour.
- Keep your relationship with your loved one healthy – play, laugh, and grow together while setting limits related to the eating disorder behaviours.

LOOK AFTER YOURSELF

There is a long and challenging road to reach recovery. Just as your loved one may need help, you may need support during the journey. Don't hesitate to seek professional help and/or peer support for yourself and the entire family, if needed. Take time to practice regular self-care. Recognize that you cannot make your loved one get better – you can only help with the recovery process. Don't take on the role of a therapist.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

You are not alone. For information, support and resources, contact NEDIC.

National Eating Disorder Information Centre

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