

Supporting Loved Ones with Eating Disorders

“How do I support my loved one during their eating disorder recovery process? This is often one of the first questions parents and partners will ask when they find out that their loved one has an eating disorder. In a valiant effort to be supportive, they often learn many things that don’t work. So, what does work? This list covers ten things to remember when supporting a loved one as they go through the journey of recovery from an eating disorder.

- 1) **Eating disorders are not about food.** These illnesses are creative coping mechanisms designed to help a person manage distressing emotions. When feelings like hurt, fear, anger, and loneliness are not appropriately expressed, they may manifest as an eating disorder. Thus, avoid making comments about how much she should or shouldn’t eat, how she looks, and how she could be “healthy.” Instead, ask her how she’s feeling, how you can support her, and what she needs to feel comforted.
- 2) **You are not to blame.** Eating disorders are caused by a combination of genetic, biological, and environmental triggers. No one person or event is ever the sole cause. While you may play a role in the development of the eating disorder, that is only one piece of the puzzle. It is important to focus on your role in the healing process and how your relationship can be a safe place for your loved one to begin their recovery.
- 3) **Recovery is a long and windy road.** Patience is key. The average length of treatment for an eating disorder is several years. Full recovery requires consistent treatment with skilled professionals. Stopping the eating disorder behaviors is only one step in the healing process; working through the emotional pain is necessary and this process takes time. Allow your loved one to fully participate in treatment without pressure to recover quickly. Also, remember that recovery moves forward and backward, so do your best to support your loved one when she takes a few step backs in her healing – this is a normal part of the process and is usually only temporary.
- 4) **Knowledge is power.** Educate yourself about eating disorders. Not only will this knowledge empower you to better understand what your loved one is going through, but it will also demonstrate to them that you care and that you are willing to do what it takes to help them get well. For starters, check out www.nationaleatingdisorders.org, www.bedaonline.com, and www.gurze.com.
- 5) **Participate in treatment.** Depending on your loved one’s recovery process, they may invite you to participate in couple or family therapy. For them, learning how to appropriately open up to you and lean on you for support can be key to their recovery. Remember, this invitation does not mean you are to blame for their eating disorder, but that your relationship with them may be a safe place for them to heal.

A *new* BEGINNING

Where lasting change is possible

- 6) **Medication can help.** The majority of eating disorders are rooted in an anxiety disorder, such as OCD or social phobia. Additionally, some people with eating disorders are also affected by depression, ADHD, PTSD, and/or substance use. For many, psychotropic medication (i.e., antidepressants, mood stabilizers) can significantly improve their abilities to manage the eating disorder behaviors as they learn new coping skills. Medicine usually does not need to be taken long-term, but can aid in the healing process for several months or years. If your loved one decides to take medication, do your best to support their decision even if it is not your personal preference to take medication.
- 7) **Things may get worse before they get better.** Before an eating disorder can be eliminated, the emotional triggers must be explored and then new coping skills must be learned and implemented. There is often a period of time, usually early on in the process, when behaviors will increase while distressing emotions come to the surface. While new ways of coping are being taught, many people will often fall back on the eating disorder because it works so well. Thus, remember that progress is not always marked by behaviors, but by a person's willingness to explore painful issues underlying the eating disorder.
- 8) **You may need support, too.** Supporting a loved one through their recovery process can be very taxing on you. Many people in your role feel confused, shocked, angry, scared, sad, and hopeless...all at the same time! It is important that you have support to help you express all of your emotions so that you can be emotionally available to help your loved one with their recovery. Consider working with your own therapist or confiding in a friend who understands the complex nature of eating disorders.
- 9) **Your loved one is not their eating disorder.** They are a person with real feelings and real needs, and the eating disorder is just one part of them. Try to focus on other aspects of who they are – admirable qualities, achievements, goals, and interests. Let them know that you see so much more than the eating disorder and that you love them, even though you don't love their eating disorder.
- 10) **Full recovery is possible!** People do heal from these illnesses and go on to enjoy very fulfilling lives. With high-quality treatment, your loved one can live without worrying about food, how she looks, or how much she weighs. She will feel happy and content, no longer burdened by the emotional weight of her pain. While this endpoint may seem far off right now, know that it is attainable and that your compassionate support will strengthen your loved one's recovery process.