

Tips for Parents and Caregivers

When a loved one is diagnosed with an eating disorder it can be confusing, exhausting, and frightening. Why won't they eat? Why are they purging? Are they going to recover? It might be difficult to wrap your head around why they are engaging in destructive behaviors, and fear might cloud your ability to help yourself and your loved one.

People develop eating disorders for *many* different reasons, which are rooted in the complex interplay of genetics and environmental factors. Whether this is a new diagnosis for your loved one or if they have been struggling for a long time, you are probably wondering if there is anything that you can do to support the recovery process. The answer is, YES!

Recovery is more than simply facing fears about food and weight. It is a complex process that demands a deep look at one's beliefs, perspectives, thoughts, actions, life, and sense of self. Recovery compels the individual to examine the underlying issues that led to the development of their eating disorder in the first place. Dealing with and reconciling the thoughts and feelings attached to those issues takes time and patience.

There is no one right way to recover, and what works for one person does not necessarily help others. Therefore, it is important to develop open, honest, and reciprocal communication. You need to be able to give each other gentle feedback about the helpful and sometimes not-so-helpful things that you both do and say to each other. Direct communication means that you can stop worrying about saying the 'wrong' thing and inadvertently jeopardizing your loved one's recovery. We are all human, and although we mean well, we sometimes say things that are not the most helpful. That does not mean, however, that you

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have single-handedly annihilated their recovery! If your communication is effective, your loved one can tell you that what you said wasn't helpful, and suggest ways that you could speak next time that will be more helpful to them. In turn, you can hear their feedback and respectfully respond to it.



Practice your communication skills often by encouraging your loved one to talk about how they feel and listen empathetically. Empathy is vital in the recovery process. Empathy means that you are trying to understand an experience exactly the way your loved one understands it, as opposed to the way *you think* they should understand it. Empathy is putting yourself in their shoes and being in their experience with them. Accept their point of view and how they feel without trying to change it. Offer them words such as, “That sounds so frustrating. I can only imagine how angry you must be!” Connecting through empathy opens the door for both of you to talk in more detail about how they experience the world. Everyone appreciates being able to share their unique points of view, thoughts, and feelings without being judged. Certainly it will help them feel less alone, and they'll take comfort in the fact that you understand and appreciate them on a deeper level. Bear in mind that empathy is not the same thing as enabling. You can hear a point of view and empathize with someone and still hold boundaries when it comes to the eating disorder.

If they are in emotional pain, be with them in it. Give them the space to experience it and move through it. It can be difficult to see someone we care about in pain, and you may find yourself immediately wanting to

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‘fix’ it to make them feel better. Think about a time in your own life when you felt intense grief. What did you want to hear? Did you want and need compassion, a warm embrace, or comfort? Being there provides the most healing kind of comfort there is. To connect and give someone a sense of understanding is one of the most precious gifts we can give to one another.



Many people worry that their loved one will be trapped in their pain forever. Others find that witnessing their loved one’s pain causes them discomfort, and then try to talk them out of their pain to make themselves feel better. Try to keep in mind that all pain is legitimate and has a purpose. Trust that pain needs recognition in order to be moved through so it can heal. You’ll find that if you walk with your loved one through their pain, you’ll both learn and grow. While it might be true that time heals all wounds, it’s love, comfort, and caring that makes the healing process bearable and complete.

It’s also important to remember that your loved one is not their eating disorder. They are a separate, distinct individual. Get to know who they are by paying attention to what makes them smile. Show them that you appreciate who they are by letting them know when and how they touch your heart. Tell them how happy they make you. Believe in their ability to heal, grow, and flourish, and tell them this. Express your concern with a warm embrace or hold their hand. A caring touch can be so healing. It can be difficult for someone with an eating disorder to be gentle with themselves. When you treat them with gentleness, compassion, and respect, it will model this behavior so they can use it for themselves.

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Encourage them to seek treatment. Receiving help in the early stages of the eating disorder often makes treatment smoother and more effective. Encourage them from a kind, caring place. While encouraging your loved one to seek treatment, you may offer to help them locate doctors, therapists, dietitians, treatment programs, and books. Keep in mind, however, that while you can offer to help them find these resources, you can't force them to use them.

Recognize your own limits. We all have them. Pretending that you don't have limits and forcing yourself to do more than you can will only make you feel resentful and angry. Ignoring your own limits will only hurt both of you in the end. If you can be there for your loved one for only a certain period of time each day or week, be clear with yourself and with your loved one about when and how long that time is. Ask yourself what you are willing and able to do. Are you willing to cook specific meals? Are you able to buy certain foods they request? Are you able to listen to them vent? Can you hear their fears after they eat? Can you non-judgmentally and factually challenge their food and body fears? Once you have thought about these questions, sit down and have an open discussion with your loved one.

Work to understand your own biases. Living in the world today, it's impossible to not be impacted by diet culture, wellness culture and some degree of fat-phobia. It will be difficult for you to support your loved one if you are actively dieting, hold rigid beliefs about certain foods and/or hold negative beliefs about body sizes and shapes. Begin to understand and challenge your beliefs with science by exploring the books [Body Respect](#) by Lindo Bacon and Lucy Aphramor and [Intuitive Eating](#) by Evelyn Tribole MS, RDN and Elyse Resch MS, RDN. A consultation with a Health At Every Size® dietitian and therapist can give you more tools to enrich your own life while offering safe support for your loved one.

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Get support for yourself. It's not easy to watch someone you care about wrestle with an eating disorder. Ultimately you don't have control over their choices. Accepting this is bound to evoke feelings of helplessness. It is a painful, frightening, frustrating, and sad experience to feel helpless when someone we care so much about is in trouble. You need to express these feelings for your own well-being. A neutral party can offer you a safer place to discuss your emotions and concerns. They can help you find constructive ways of talking with your loved one about how you feel and are affected, because that is important too.



12 Tips to Support Recovery

1. Make sure you take care of yourself and set up a support system for yourself as well as your loved one.
2. Avoid any and all comments about your loved one's body (or anybody's!)
3. Remember that your loved one is not their eating disorder. It is possible to love them and hate their eating disorder at the same time. Love them unconditionally.
4. Remember to avoid simplistic solutions like "just eat" or "stop doing that!" It only invalidates their struggle and compounds feelings of misunderstanding and isolation.
5. Avoid discussing what, how, or when they should eat. You'll end up in a power struggle.
6. Avoid trying to control their food intake unless you are receiving guidance from a practitioner specializing in the Maudsley Method or Family Based Therapy.
7. When communicating, use "I" statements. "You" statements sound accusatory, judgmental and make people feel defensive. "I" statements show that you're taking responsibility for how you feel and think.

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8. Avoid labeling foods as good or bad.
9. Don't advocate the diet mentality.
10. Focus on things that don't relate to food, weight, and exercise. Be there for company. Remember that they need people in their life who can respond to them about more than just food intake and body weight.
11. Try not to worry about saying the 'wrong' thing. You won't have an irreversible, negative impact on their recovery. It's better to say something with supportive intentions than to say nothing and have them interpret your silence as a lack of caring.
12. Encourage them to be human, not perfect.

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