

## HOW YOU CAN HELP

As the friend or family member of a person with an eating disorder, your response to their distress can play a crucial part in their recovery. Changes will not happen overnight. Progress will be gradual and will include setbacks.

### Below are some helpful points to keep in mind:

- Learn as much as you can about the disorder.
- Don't be afraid of expressing your concerns as honestly as you can.
- Try to be as honest and open as you can about how you are feeling.
- Understand that it may take some time for them to trust that you are not trying to take their coping tool (i.e. their eating disorder) away from them immediately.
- Whenever possible, shift the focus off food and onto feelings.
- Don't use food intake and weight as your only criteria for measuring progress in recovery.
- Don't treat relapse as a failure. Learning to cope with relapse is a very valuable part of the recovery process.
- It is important not to try and 'fix' someone on your own. If you find yourself overwhelmed, do seek help and support for yourself.
- Patterns in relationships will change and some of these changes may be extremely difficult and painful. Remind yourself that change means progress.
- Don't feel pressured into changing your own eating habits and routines.



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We are a voice, a listening ear,  
a support for those affected by  
eating disorders and their families.

## SERVICES

- Email Support Service
- 24 Hour Helpline Support
- Drop-in Service
- 1-1 Support
- Monthly Support Groups
- Early Intervention/Prevention Programmes for Schools and Youth Groups
- Workshops for Professionals

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**Supporting  
Someone**  
with an eating disorder



## INFORMATION FOR FRIENDS & FAMILY MEMBERS

When someone we care for is in distress, it has an impact on us too. It is natural to want to help and make them feel better. It is not always easy to know the best way to do this.

While it can be very difficult to see someone we care about going through an eating disorder, it is important to begin by accepting that the person themselves needs to firstly acknowledge there is a problem and ultimately they must make a decision to move towards change and let the eating disorder go. The decision to move towards recovery is a difficult one and it will be made easier if they know that they have your support.

*If the person is over 18, it is important to recognise that it is their responsibility to make the decision to change. If, on the other hand, you are trying to support someone who is under 18, this may require a lot more encouragement and intervention on your part to move towards acknowledging the need for change.*

Eating disorders usually develop over a considerable period of time and can be viewed as a response to distress with which the person feels unable to cope.

No matter what disordered eating behaviour a person is engaging in, changes will occur:

- in their body.
- in the way they think.
- in the way they perceive things.
- in the way they behave.
- in the way they relate to other people.

During the time that the person is unwell and as they begin to recover, you may feel like you hardly recognise the person you knew before. Relating to them may become increasingly difficult.

At times, you may feel confused, frightened, angry, sad, guilty, resentful, helpless, exhausted, lonely, desperate. Accepting these feelings in yourself and trying not to blame the person with the disorder is one of the most helpful things you can do in your efforts to give support.

## WHERE TO START

A person with an eating disorder is often terrified of change and may not be able to imagine living without the eating disorder.

So, while they will be painfully aware of the anguish they are causing you, they may not be able to show it because they may feel caught in a conflict between the eating disorder and their concern for you.

Thinking of an eating disorder as a coping mechanism can help those around the person understand why it is so hard for them to let the eating disorder go.

It can be helpful to understand that the eating disorder has a function for the person – that it helps them feel that they are coping with things. If you are able to acknowledge that the eating disorder is serving this purpose for them, you may be better able to understand why a part of them will want to maintain the eating disorder because it makes them feel safe.

This inner conflict may make the person feel a whole range of confusing emotions, and they may doubt that they deserve your support.

## SUPPORTING RECOVERY

For the person with an eating disorder, recovery begins with accepting themselves as they are. Your acceptance of them and your unconditional respect will be a source of invaluable support.

- Accept that you cannot fix things for them, nor should you attempt to tell them what to do.
- Try to avoid second-guessing their needs.
- Ask them what they need from you. If they don't know, then that needs to be accepted too.

Their first steps on the journey to recovery will take place in their own time and at their own pace. For you, this may seem frustratingly slow. They will need you to make room for their fear, their resistance, and their uncertainty.

Ultimately they will need to attend to both the physical and the psychological aspects of the eating disorder.

### Especially for parents:

- Your child is caught between wanting independence and needing to be cared for. You will need to communicate to them that they have both and that they don't need to do anything to 'deserve' either.
- Don't overlook unacceptable behaviour. Limits need to be set even if they are difficult.
- Share what you know about eating disorders with your other children and encourage them to express their range of feelings about what is happening to their brother/sister and to their family.
- Aim to be consistent in your approach, and where there are two parents involved aim to have a united approach.

### Especially for siblings:

- Accept that it is not your fault.
- Try to remember that your brother/sister is very distressed and has not stopped caring for you.
- Accept that you may have strong and conflicting feelings towards your brother/sister.
- Express your fears to your parents; try to feel comfortable asking for more formal supports if you feel that you may need it.
- Ask for information about the eating disorder.
- Try not to discontinue shared activities.
- Remember that even though your parents' attention may be focussed on trying to help your brother/sister recover, your needs are still valid and you should still feel able to ask for support.

The experience of supporting someone else through an eating disorder can take a significant toll on friends and loved ones. It is important that you acknowledge your own need for support, and that you identify support mechanisms for yourself at this time.