

Working together

How parents can help their child recover from an eating disorder

Eating disorders have a way of dividing and wearing down parents. The conflict and confusion created by an eating disorder causes parents to back away from their main job – re-nourishing their child. To help their child recover, both parents need to work together as they learn about the eating disorder and take part in their child's treatment.

Reading this booklet can help you learn how to make a united stand against your child's eating disorder.

A strong alliance between parents is the best defense against an eating disorder.

Guiding principles for parents

Eating disorders are complex illnesses, so you may find it helpful to always keep these guiding principles in mind:

- Research has proven that parents are their child's best chance at recovery.
- Parents need to act quickly and work together to present a united front against the eating disorder. Spending time intensely trying to restore your child to a normal weight greatly increases the chance of a complete recovery.
- If parents do not share information and discuss and discover ways to approach daily struggles, the eating disorder will find a way to create conflict, continue restricting food, and prevent your child and family from functioning normally.

A full and complete recovery from an eating disorder is possible and expected for most young people who receive treatment.

What BOTH OF YOU can do to help your child

Learn as much as you can about the eating disorder. Learn what an eating disorder is and what it is not (it is not “normal” defiant teenager behaviour that your child will outgrow).

- Each member of the Pediatric Eating Disorders Team will contribute to your learning. We can help you learn about the eating disorder, how to manage problem behaviours and how to help your child recover. Along the way, your own beliefs about food, body image, weight and size may be challenged.
- Read the book: “Help your teenager beat an eating disorder”. Copies are available to borrow from the Eating Disorders Clinic.
- Go to our workshops together. Attending education sessions as a family sends a strong message to your child that his/her parents are working together and are both committed to helping him/her get well.

Go to your child’s medical visits and take an active part in your child’s treatment plan.

- When possible, both of you should come with your child to medical appointments and share information. Try not to cancel or frequently reschedule appointments.
- We will keep you up-to-date on your child’s progress and treatment plans. Please feel free to ask questions and discuss your issues and concerns.
- Treatment will be more effective if you follow through by supporting the health professionals’ plan or recommendations.

Recognize that your child has a serious problem and you have an important role to play in the solution.

- The more you can agree on parenting approaches, the more successful you can be in working together to fight the eating disorder.
- You may find that making changes in your life to help your child can be difficult and uncomfortable. Remember that we are here to support you.

**Problems can arise if parents have different beliefs,
one parent knows more or only one parent gets involved.**

Facing challenges together

Parents face some common challenges. Here are some ways that you can work together to manage daily struggles.

Nutrition

Common challenges:

- Parents do not believe that their child requires the amount of nutrition prescribed.
- Only one parent knows what is on the meal plan or keeps up with changes.
- Discomfort with being firm that the child needs to eat and can do it.
- Not having family meals.
- Allowing the child to prepare his or her own meals.
- Tolerating the child eating before mom and dad come home.
- Allowing the child to eat in his or her room or elsewhere, away from the family.
- “Diet” products are purchased in the home for other family members.
- Making last minute substitutions to avoid conflict.
- One parent accepts that their child “ate something” rather than supporting their spouse and insisting that the child eat all of the meal.
- One parent makes private arrangements with the child.

Discuss your approach to helping your child and stick with the plan.

Recognize that negotiation (bargaining around food) is a normal part of the process for teens with eating disorders. This is how your child’s eating disorder tries to get “its” needs met. However, consistently refusing to negotiate around food issues will eventually lessen your child’s anxiety and allow him or her to eat more normally. Setting limits will likely upset your child at first, but can lead to a sense of safety and control over the power of the eating disorder.

Family meals are a time to check in with each other's day, as well as a time to provide support to your child and each other (especially the parent who is providing the most direct supervision).

As a parent, you cannot make your child eat. You can, however, create a climate and structured environment where this is more likely to happen.

Exercise

Common challenges:

- Allowing over-activity because it seems to make the child "happier".
- Belief that the child's self-esteem will suffer if he or she is not allowed to continue in "normal" activities.
- Lack of agreement to put off certain or all activities until health requirements are met (for example – gym class, dancing, certification for life guarding, track meets).
- Not labeling problem behaviours (for example – sit ups or jumping jacks) and intervening.
- Allowing more than the prescribed amount of activity because "that's how we spend time together".
- Using exercise as a way to compensate your child for eating. For example – "If you eat your lunch, you can do your exercise video" (or use the exercise bike, etc).

It can be very challenging for you to understand and support the doctor's decision that activity needs to be limited or completely stopped. This can be particularly difficult if your child's activity is a sport that he or she has previously enjoyed and has developed a high level of skill (for example, in ballet, tennis or rowing).

You may worry that your child will not "catch up", will "lose friends" or "not be competitive". If your family is usually physically active, you may not want your child to feel left out. However, restoring your child's physical and emotional health must be top priority. Your child's doctor will work closely with you and your child to slowly return him or her to a healthy level of activity.

Emotions

Common challenges:

- A parent has (or had) disordered eating, over-activity or body image distress.
- Parents feel guilty or wonder if the illness is somehow their fault.
- Parents may “blame” one another, rather than working together against the eating disorder.
- Unresolved conflict makes it difficult for parents to jointly work on the task of re-nourishing their child.
- A parent feels unsupported, but doesn’t communicating this to his or her spouse.
- One parent feels “burned out” or is “making things worse” and leaves the burden of supporting the child to the other parent.
- “Taking sides” with the eating disorder against the supervising spouse and the treatment team.
- Feeling “things are better when we don’t make her/him eat”.
- Difficulty dealing with the child’s or spouse’s anger.
- Difficulty tolerating the child’s distress at making changes.
- Difficulty accepting that the child may need to miss out on some activities (at first) to become healthy
- Allowing siblings or friends to “supervise” the child’s meals or snacks and report to parents.

Parents of a child with an eating disorder face intense challenges to communicate clearly, manage their own stress and make changes to their daily routine. It is common for parents to say that re-nourishing their child is the most difficult challenge that their family has ever faced. It is normal that emotions become heightened.

If you and your spouse have different opinions or conflicts, you need to talk and find ways to resolve these issues – in private or with your child’s therapist. If you can resolve problems or set aside your differences, you will be better able to support each other and help your child.

Focus on how the two of you can work together to best support your child in the process of recovery. Your commitment to helping your child can help him or her feel safe and valued.

Both of you have parenting ideas and skills that have been successful in the past. Draw on these experiences. Your belief that recovery is possible can help your child's progress.

Your child's therapist can offer support and counseling if you need help to cope with the impact of the eating disorder on you and your relationship with your spouse.

Scheduling

Common challenges:

- One parent is not available to attend medical or therapy appointments because he or she is working.
- One parent is not available for most meals and snacks because he or she works extended hours.
- Parents are stressed because the child continues in school and extra-curricular activities and they can't figure out a way to provide supervision.

Many teens with eating disorders describe having a lot of trouble just relaxing. They feel a strong desire to always be doing something, to be “productive” and “get ahead”. As a parent, you can send a strong message through your own actions - that slowing down is OK.

To recover from an eating disorder and stay well, your child needs to learn how to lead a balanced life that includes relaxation and managing stress. As with all skills, this takes time and practice.
