

# Helping your child manage mealtime stress

## Diversion techniques can distract your child from worrying

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Many children who suffer with eating disorders find that certain times of the day are more distressing than others, particularly after certain meals. It is important to talk with your child about his or her feelings. Keep the lines of communication open and find ways to provide support.

As a parent, you can help lessen your child's worry about eating by using diversion techniques. Diversion techniques distract your child from persistent eating disorder thoughts, which cause distress and prevent your child from enjoying eating.

In this handout, we describe some common diversion techniques that other families and children have found helpful. Discuss them with your child and find out what he or she would find helpful.

## Diversion techniques

### Before a meal

- Discuss with your spouse how you are going to support your child and address his or her eating struggles should they happen at the table.
  - Know which parent will supervise the meal. When possible, rotate the job of meal supervision between parents. This role can be very stressful for parents and it is normal to need a break. Sharing the job also lets your child know that both parents are able to support his or her eating and manage his or her distress.
  - Talk privately to your other children about not commenting on their brother or sister's eating habits.
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## **Keeping the conversation light**

- Eating disorders have a way of becoming topics of conversation. Don't let this happen at the dinner table. Do not talk about emotionally-charged topics such as weight, exercise or food.
- Keep the conversation light and moving. Children and teens tell us that they dislike having the focus on them and often feel that people are staring or don't know what to say.
- It is necessary and appropriate to gently coach your child through a meal if he or she is struggling. Do not let this become a power struggle. Speak in a firm, empathetic tone. Guide your child through what he or she needs to do. For example, "Jane, it has been 15 minutes and you have not started your chicken. I need you to pick up your fork and begin to eat."

## **Engage in interesting topics or activities**

- Try to get your child to talk about things that interest him or her. This could be hobbies, movies, friends or places to visit. Or talk about what is going on in the lives of his or her brothers or sisters.
- Discuss interesting or funny things that happened in your day. Try to keep the conversation to what was "normal" before your child developed an eating disorder.
- If several people are eating together, think of interesting topics or activities to do at the table, such as trivia or crossword puzzles.
- When your child is not the centre of everyone's attention, he or she can feel more relaxed. This also gives siblings and the non-supervising parent a helpful role.

## **Create a relaxed environment**

How this happens varies from family to family. Talk to your child about what would make eating easier for him or her. Some families find it helpful to:

- have music playing in the background
- know ahead of time what is for dinner and when it will be served
- have everyone arrive at the table together and remain until everyone is finished
- not over schedule weekday activities – rushing through dinner to get to another activity often adds to the parents' and child's stress

### **Find something new to do together**

- Children often feel that it is hard to escape the feeling of being under the “eating disorder microscope”. Find an activity that can give you all a break from the ordinary. This could be going on an outing or day trip, renting or going to a movie or playing a board game.
- The time right after a meal can be more distressing for your child than the mealtime. Planning an activity or something to do during this time can be very helpful.

### **Talk about the future**

- Talking about the future in a hopeful, positive way can help your child get through a stressful moment. For example, you could say “once we are done this meal we can...”.

### **Practice relaxation techniques together**

- Make it a part of your routine to find at least 5 minutes each day to relax together. It can be as easy as closing your eyes and playing some relaxing music. You can do this before and after meals as well as during the day.

### **Keep meals a reasonable length of time**

- Make sure that meals do not take too long. Delaying a meal or making it last longer just makes your child feel more anxious for a longer time.
- We recommend that a snack should take 15 minutes or less and a meal should take less than 30 minutes.

**It will take some time and practice to use diversion techniques.**

**If you have any questions or would like some help,  
please talk with your therapist.**