

If your child develops an eating disorder, you may feel unsure how to help and how to act around them.

Eating disorders and your child

Your son or daughter's behaviour may suddenly become very different from what you're used to: withdrawn, touchy and even rude. This can make it very difficult to talk to them at a time when communication is so important.

It can help to remember that they are likely to be defensive because their eating disorder is their way of coping, therefore they will be reluctant to let go of it.

If your child is having treatment for their condition, the treatment team will play an essential part in their recovery. But don't underestimate the importance of your love and support.

Susan Ringwood, Chief Executive of the charity **Beat**, explains: "Everyone who recovers from an eating disorder tells us how important it was to have unconditional love and support from those who care about them, even when they knew their behaviour was quite difficult to understand."

Speak to one of the health professionals in your child's GP surgery or school nurse about your role as parent and carer. Get their advice on what you can do at home to help. The following tips may also help with communication and dealing with mealtimes.

Tips for talking about eating disorders

Talking to your child about their condition can be very difficult, especially if they still can't accept that they have a problem. However, communication is essential to help with recovery, so keep trying.

When you want to talk to them directly about the eating disorder:

- Prepare what to say.
- Don't blame or judge.
- Concentrate on how they're feeling.
- Stay calm.
- Have resources to refer to.
- Be prepared for a negative response.

It can also help to:

- Learn as much as possible about eating disorders. It helps you understand what you're dealing with.
- Emphasise that no matter what, you love them and will always be there for them.
- Avoid talking about their appearance, even if it is meant as a compliment. Try to build their confidence in other ways – for example, by praising them for being thoughtful or congratulating them on an achievement at school.
- Avoid talking about other people's diets or weight problems.
- Talk to them about the range of professional help available, and say that you'll support them through it when they're ready.
- Talk positively about activities they could be involved in that don't involve food, such as hobbies and days out with friends.
- Try not to feel hurt if they don't open up to you straight away, and don't resent them for being secretive. This is due to their illness, not their relationship with you.
- Ask them what you can do to help.
- Try to be honest about your own feelings. This will encourage them to do the same.
- Remember that the feelings behind the eating disorder may be really difficult for them to express. Try to be patient and listen to what they're trying to say.
- Be a good role model by eating a balanced diet and taking a healthy amount of exercise.
- Try to use sentences starting with "I", such as "I'm worried because you don't seem happy", rather than sentences beginning with "you".
- Your child may come across as angry and aggressive, but bear in mind that they may actually be feeling fearful and insecure.



Tips for coping with mealtimes

- If your child is in treatment, ask their treatment team about the most appropriate way to arrange your mealtimes.
- Consider going shopping together and agreeing on meals that are acceptable to you both.
- An agreement with the whole family about what and when meals will be can help to set everybody's expectations.
- Agree that none of you will talk about portion sizes, calories or the fat content of the meal.
- Avoid eating low-calorie or diet foods in front of them or having them in the house.
- Try to keep the atmosphere light-hearted and positive throughout the meal, even if you don't feel that way on the inside.
- If they attempt to get too involved in cooking the meal as a way of controlling it, gently ask them to set the table or wash up instead.
- Try not to focus too much on them during mealtimes. Enjoy your own meal and try to make conversation.
- A family activity after the meal, such as a game or watching TV, can help to distract them from wanting to purge themselves or over-exercise.
- Don't despair if a meal goes badly, just move on.

Help and support with eating disorders

If you need further support, there are a number of organisations that can help you. It's important that the whole family understands the situation and gets support. See your GP / school nurse as soon as possible to discuss your concerns and it may be that they refer your child onto the CAMHS team who will support your child and give advice to you as the parent / carer.

Alternatively, you can call the **Beat helpline on 0845 634 1414** to speak to an advisor about any issue related to coping with eating disorders, including how to find local self-help and support groups.

Young Minds parents' helpline on 0808 802 5544 (Mon-Fri 9.30-4pm) can also provide support as well as Children's Services school nursing team who can be contacted at www.southernhealth.nhs.uk/schoolnursing