

Coping Strategies for Families and Partners of an Individual Living with an Eating Disorder

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Parents and partners of an individual with an eating problem often find themselves confused and scared as they cope with the knowledge that a loved one is in pain, and may question their role in the development of the problem and recovery process.

Different demands will be made on family members when the individual with the eating disorder is living at home, compared to those families where the affected individual is living independently. However, there will be some common principles in coping with the situation, and with the individual with an eating disorder.

Other NEDIC articles have addressed how to support adolescents with eating problems and looked at both the stages of change and how to guide youth through them into recovery (see [What is Helping? Youth & Recovery](#)). This article looks at some of the strategies that family members and partners of an affected individual can use to better understand the complexity of their own situations and to manage their lives in a healthy manner during the recovery process.

A basic requirement for coping during this difficult time is recognizing that eating disorders do not develop because of one traumatic event or situation. They develop out of a complex interaction between events, circumstances, and the individual's biology, personality, and coping style. This means that you are not to blame for your family member's eating disorder. The individual struggling with the eating disorder is also not to blame for "getting sick." By not apportioning blame to oneself and other family members for the problem, it is easier to mobilize energy to deal with the current situation.

One of the most valuable assets that you can develop for yourself is knowing your enemy, which is neither the affected family member, nor any other person. The enemy is the eating disorder. Lack of understanding of the condition from which your loved one suffers may cause you to make poor decisions in handling the situation. It is highly recommended that you get well informed about eating disorders. You and your family are going to be addressing the physical and psychological consequences of your loved one's condition for a while; eating disorders do not develop overnight, nor are they resolved overnight. Knowing some of the factors which contribute to developing, maintaining, and perpetuating an eating disorder can be helpful in making decisions on how to cope with the specific situations you will face.

Blaming and feeling guilt around your family member's food and weight preoccupation issues are not helpful; being more self-reflective, however, can be. In examining the manner in which you typically communicate and treat yourself and others, for example, you may see that there is room for improvement. Perhaps there are changes that could lead to clearer communication and

less tension between family members. The difficulties you experience with your family member may be lessened by the understanding that the person is not acting as they do to hurt or inconvenience you; the eating disorder behaviours may be serving as a coping strategy. The distress that the affected individual is experiencing is significant, regardless of how much they may deny it. Reflecting on the impact of larger cultural influences and messages on issues such as appearance in general, on food, weight, and shape in particular, and on values relating to gender, may be useful. It can help in understanding your own attitudes and biases as well as those of the family member who has an eating disorder.

It is vital to understand that it is not possible or appropriate for you to make decisions for the adult suffering from an eating disorder. The individual has to take responsibility for choosing to pursue recovery and what path that will take. Although you can provide support and encouragement, recovery and the form that it takes is a choice that is the affected person's to make.

Understanding eating disorders and your response to the affected individual and their behaviour can be enhanced through meeting with others in a similar situation. There are many self-help and support groups for family and friends of an individual with an eating disorder. Take advantage of them; you can benefit from the knowledge and strategies of others. Support groups also provide comfort to many.

In addition to a support group, it may be helpful to seek family, couples, or individual therapy or counselling. It is common for families and couples to experience increased difficulties while one member is struggling with an eating disorder. Counselling can help one increase their insight into strengths and weaknesses in their relationships, as well as develop additional adaptive strategies with which to deal with everyday life and stressors.

Living with or emotionally supporting someone with an eating disorder can be time consuming and draining. Take time out – ensure that you have appropriate avenues of self-care, and use them. This may take the form of regular outings with friends, time set aside for pursuing an interest or hobby, or simply taking breaks each day to relax and savour a few quiet moments.

Maintaining a basic self-care routine is fundamental to your own quality of life. It is important to nourish yourself adequately and to engage in pleasurable physical activity. This helps keep your energy levels and mood where you want them to be and, in a social context, can add to your quality of life. It may feel strange to eat regular meals and to enjoy food when a family member is struggling with these issues. However, it is important not to punish yourself for their suffering by not eating well or nourishing yourself, physically and emotionally. In fact, in this and other areas, you may be a positive role model for the person struggling to find a healthy balance.

One of our major sources of affirmation and pleasure is our social contact with others. When we become depressed or overburdened, we tend to withdraw from social events. It is precisely at

times when we need uplifting that we need to remember our friendships. Meeting with people for whom we have a great deal of affection, and with whom we have things in common other than a relative struggling with a mental health condition, can boost our sense of well-being. Socializing and discussing subjects of genuine interest to you can be rejuvenating. Having time out with friends and colleagues does not detract from the support you can provide for your loved one. On the contrary, it can help you keep things in perspective and re-energize you so you are better able to cope with the demands of caring for a person with an eating disorder.

Sometimes the individual with an eating disorder asks their partners and family members keep their situation secret. This may infringe on your ability to receive appropriate personal support. One way of dealing with this is to be guarded with regard to whom you confide in, and to let the person with the eating disorder know whom you have told.

Boundaries and responsibilities can become blurred when we live with someone with an eating disorder. It is natural to want to do everything possible to help the individual. It seems natural to want to try to take some pressure off one's loved one, and to take on tasks that they don't want to or appear unable to do. On the other hand, fear of angering or being punished by the affected individual may motivate taking on their responsibilities. It is important to be clear about each family member's role and responsibilities. Be wary of taking on the duties of the affected family member – let them do what they can safely for themselves as this encourages a sense of efficacy, independence, and personal responsibility, which all contribute to increased self-esteem. Also develop boundaries and expectations around the way in which the affected individual behaves within the relationship and the home. As an example, the individual may find grocery shopping too stressful at present, so they will do the laundry in exchange.

Although it may seem all-consuming, don't make the eating disorder as large as life; it should not control your life or dominate the relationship that you have with your loved one, or be the centre of your relationships with other family members. Keeping in mind what you have the power to control, and establishing solid boundaries around your relationship with the individual experiencing the eating disorder, makes it easier to maintain stability during this stressful time. It is by living the principles of an engaged and well-rounded lifestyle that you can best assist your family member.

Survival tips for families and partners

- Learn about eating disorders.
- Recognize there is no quick and easy solution.
- Remember that no one is to blame for the eating disorder.
- Attend support groups to connect with other families dealing with similar challenges and learn new coping strategies.
- Encourage your loved one to get appropriate help.
- Go on with your life – don't let the eating disorder dominate.
- Show compassion not just for your loved one but for yourself.
- Engage in social outings, hobbies, and activities that give you pleasure.
- Eat well and move your body in ways that you enjoy to maintain your own health and to feel energized.
- Express honest love through physical and verbal affection for your loved one.
- Value your loved one to help them learn to value themselves.
- Acknowledge that an eating disorder is difficult to give up, and allow your loved one to set their own pace for healing.
- Encourage your loved one to make decisions and take responsibility as appropriate.
- Create other focuses for engagement than food and weight.
- Don't expect yourself or your family member to be perfect.
- Communicate directly with your loved one about specific concerns.
- Take time to nurture yourself.
- Allow yourself to express feelings like disappointment, frustration, and anger rather than try to suppress them – remember that these are natural feelings and that there are constructive ways to let them out, like journaling and talking to a counsellor.

Some suggested reading

Siegel, M., Brisman, J., & Weinschel, M. (2021). *Surviving an eating disorder: Strategies for family and friends*. Fourth revised edition. New York, Harper Perennial.

Treasure, J., Smith, G., & Crane, A. (2016). *Skills-based learning for caring for a loved one with an eating disorder: The New Maudsley Method*. London, Routledge.

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