

## Guidelines for Family and Friends

There are no quick or easy solutions for recovery from an eating disorder. Therapists, physicians and other experts have no magic that can cure your loved one. Be wary if someone offers guarantees or quick cures.

If the sufferer is to recover s/he will need to make some attitudinal and behavioral changes. You cannot make them for him/her. You and other loved ones will also need to make some changes to accommodate his/her growth. It is a good idea for all of you to take advantage of professional help to make the rough spots a little smoother.

1. **Allow yourself not to know all the answers about how to help the person you love.** This does not make you any less of a parent/partner/sibling/friend. Admitting your lack of understanding of the problem demonstrates you are human and allows the individual to seek professional help.
2. **If your child is under 19 (legal adulthood), GET HIM/HER INTO THERAPY IMMEDIATELY.** Do not hesitate out of fear that s/he will hate you.
3. **If the individual is over 19 years of age,** you need to recognize that you have no legal control over her/him. S/he can choose to be helped, or not. You do have control however, over how much you will let yourself be affected by the behavior. To protect yourself, you may have to negotiate limits on the amenities you provide which reinforce the eating disorder behaviors.
4. **Once the individual is in therapy,** avoid getting involved in discussions or arguments over weight and food behaviors. If you become concerned about weight loss, dehydration, or other signs of medical deterioration call the therapist, physician, or both. If your child over age 19, your concerns need to be discussed openly between the two of you, rather than contacting the doctor.
5. **Do not let family life or your relationship revolve around the eating disorder.** Make sure you and other members of the family take time for satisfying activities and fun. Do not spend all of your time with the person who has the eating disorder; you will encourage mutual dependence. Both of you need to maintain outside friendships.
6. **Do not give the eating disorder control over what the family eats,** which restaurants you patronize, or where you go on outings and vacations. Remember, other family members are entitled to have input into these kinds of decisions.
7. **Give the individual responsibility for the consequences of her/his words, actions, decisions, and behaviors.** Do not protect the individual by giving her/him the power to avoid all situations s/he finds distressing.
8. **Give him/her responsibility to replace what she/he has eaten on a binge, or to clean up the bathroom in which a purge has occurred.** This is intended to help the individual deal with reality without punishing the behavior. However, in some instances the person with the eating disorder is not always financially able to replace what she/he has consumed.

9. **Verbally and physically express unconditional love, acceptance and affection for the individual.** Do not tie your caring to sermons about eating and demands concerning weight gain.
10. **Admit** you sometimes feel angry, frustrated, helpless, afraid, powerless, and hopeless. Allow yourself to show these feelings and allow her/him to see them. By sharing your feelings, you are providing the most direct permission for the individual to feel and express her/his own emotions.
11. **Participate** in family therapy or a support group. Don't become isolated with your problem; it only escalates feelings of isolation and resentment. Keeping the disorder a secret does not help anyone.
12. **Develop ways of sharing and socializing** that do not involve food. Develop dialogues about topics other than food, weight and diets at the meal table.
13. **Model healthy behavior.** Do not go on diets. Take an honest look at your reasons for dieting and exercise. Are you putting priority on your appearance over your health? It is hard for an individual with an eating disorder to try and change her/his thoughts about weight loss when significant others around him/her are reinforcing the importance of appearance and thinness.
14. **Recognize qualities, skills, abilities, values and talents** in the individual that are independent of her/his appearance. Share with him/her what you appreciate about her/him and are attracted to and this will help in developing a more positive sense of self.
15. **Avoid** power struggles over gaining weight; s/he will always win.
16. **Do not** make statements like, "If you won't change for yourself, do it for me (us)", "you are ruining the whole family", or "why are you doing this to me?" The individual will feel guilty and responsible for the welfare of the rest of the family. This will not change her/his attitudes and behaviors. **You must** take care of your own welfare. Do not make this individual responsible for your own happiness. That is too much for anyone to ask another.
17. **Offer your support, both emotionally and psychologically.** Ask "what kind of support could you use at this time?" or "how can I support you?"
18. **Do not ask**, "Are you better?" This is a loaded question and calls for the response, "yes, of course." Look for broader definitions of recovery than just changes in eating behaviors or weight. Attitude changes are not easily observable. You must learn to stop judging progress on behaviors and outside appearances.
19. **Realize** that at best s/he is probably ambivalent about wanting to get well. At times, s/he may want to be "normal"; at other times, s/he will retreat into old rituals and behaviors s/he perceives as safe and secure. Be patient. This small setback may be necessary for her/him at present. Do not reprimand her/him for these actions or add to her/his guilt.
20. **Realize that you are trying to do what is right and best in an extremely difficult situation. Recovery takes time, patience and professional help. Allow yourself to seek support and understanding from local resources for friends and families in your same situation.**

*Root and Fallon (1983)*