

A Parent's Guide to Navigating an Eating Disorder

This guide is intended for parents of those diagnosed with an eating disorder. Recovery from an eating disorder takes a village and we want to help you gain a clear understanding of how to best support your child through recovery. This guide will cover ways to promote a healthy relationship between food, bodies, and ourselves. The hope is that after reading through this guide, you will better understand what your child is going through in recovery and how to best support them.

Importance of Changing our Language Around Food and Body Image

Conversations about food, weight, body image, and diets can impact your child as they move through their recovery. When someone with an eating disorder hears the people they are surrounded by speaking in a way that reaffirms their eating disorder thoughts, it makes it that much more challenging to make progress towards recovery. Food and body image/weight are two of the most important topics to focus on changing your language around to create a food-neutral and body-neutral environment in your home and hopefully outside of your home around friends and family.

Changing Our Language Around Food

All Food is Neutral

When talking about different foods, it is best to not label any foods as “good” or “bad.” It is also important to not label ourselves as “good” or “bad” for eating certain foods. For example, it is best to refrain from phrases such as:

→ “Vegetables are good because they are low in calories.”

→ “Oranges are good foods because they have vitamin C.”

While it is true that vegetables are low in calories and oranges have vitamin C, labeling these foods as “good” promotes the idea that while there are good foods, there are also bad foods. It also promotes the idea that we are “good” when we eat these foods and we are being “bad” when we eat “bad foods.”

The goal is for all foods to have a neutral value. All foods can be enjoyed whenever we please in whatever amounts satisfy us.

We can also rephrase stereotypical statements surrounding foods people often label as “bad.” For example, it is best to refrain from phrases such as:

→ “Bread is bad because it is high in carbs.”

→ “Candy is bad because it is high in sugar.”

While bread does contain carbohydrates and candy does contain sugar, labeling these foods as “bad” promotes a negative relationship with these foods, and can lead us to believe we are “bad” for eating these foods. Furthermore, these statements and beliefs can spur an overall negative relationship with other foods high in sugar and carbohydrates like bagels, pasta, cake, and rice.

Shifting the focus from calories, fat, or carbs to a focus on the joys of food and how it makes us feel is a great place to start changing your outlook and language around food. Hopefully, as you begin to be mindful of your language and relationship with food, you can begin to slowly make some of these changes and instill a positive mindset around food for your child and even other children you may have.



When talking about different foods, we can phrase our comments to focus on how they make us feel, the flavors, colors, textures, and more. Here are some examples of how to rephrase the previous comments that demonstrate a more food-neutral approach:

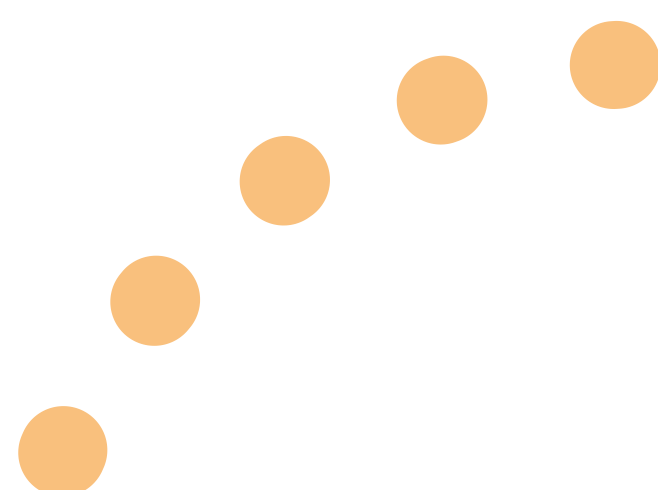
→ “Vegetables make me feel energized, so I’m going to cook some with dinner.”

→ “I love how flavorful oranges taste, so I am going to pick some up at the store.”

→ “I love the texture of these dinner rolls, I think I’ll have a second one.”

→ “I love the taste of this candy. I think I’ll pick up more at the store tomorrow!”

The goal is to take the morality out of food and see it as a source of nourishment, enjoyment, and at times, celebration.



All Foods in the House

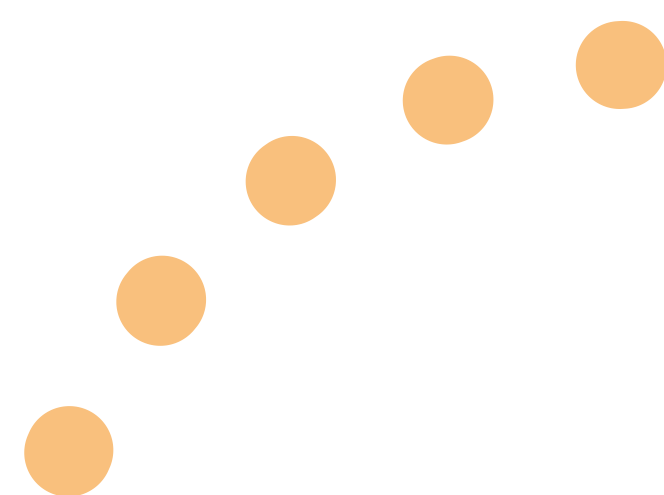
When we have a more neutral approach to food, it allows us to keep a variety of foods in the home to demonstrate how all foods are acceptable to enjoy.

→ Meats, fish, poultry, vegetables, fruits, grains, nuts/seeds, snacks, frozen foods, desserts, juices, etc. are all great to add to your shopping list.

For example, if ice cream is only a “treat” that is rarely available in the home and can only be allowed if a child achieves a good grade on their test, they now learn to associate ice cream as being a food they can only eat if they earned it; rather than a food they can eat whenever they have the desire. Ice cream, or any other desserts or “treats,” are now put on a pedestal above other foods and treated as something special.

The goal is for all foods to be on the same pedestal.

While we may consume some foods more often than others (for example, we consume vegetables more frequently than ice cream) it does not mean we should never have these foods present.



Fear Foods

While keeping a variety of foods in the house is beneficial, it is also notable to be mindful of your child's fear foods.

In the context of an eating disorder, “fear foods” are foods that your child may be reluctant to eat due to negative thoughts and emotions about the food (how many calories it contains, fat content, possible weight gain from consuming it, etc).

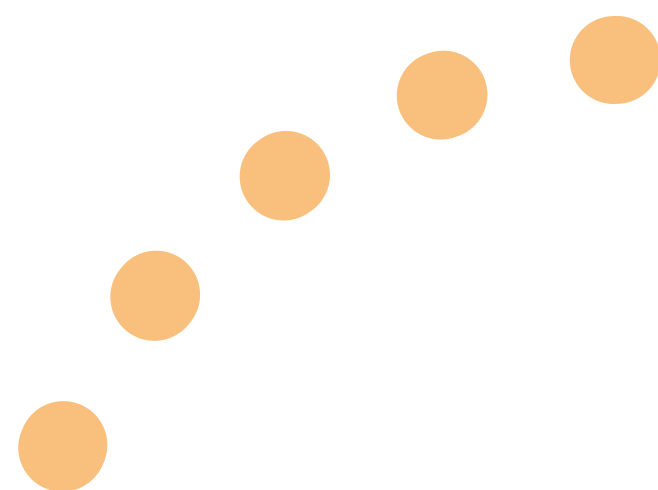
As a parent, the best way to help your child overcome their fear foods is exposure. Exposing your child to their fear foods will lead to desensitization of their reaction to it. This means including foods in your family dinner that your child may typically avoid (for example, if dinner rolls are a fear food), serving dinner rolls with a dinner of chicken and salad in order to maintain exposure to a traditional meal pattern.

Often folks with an eating disorder discover the anticipation of the fear food is far scarier than actually consuming the food. Encouragement is recommended, however, everyone is at their own stage of facing their fear foods. One day may be harder to face than another day. If your child is having a bad day filled with anxiety or sadness, this might not be the day to bring attention to their fear foods. However, continued exposure, whether they enjoy the foods or not, is essential during recovery.

A great way to help your child move through fear foods is to create a list of foods that your child used to eat before they showed signs of an eating disorder. Trying to incorporate these foods every week or so into meals can be helpful to expose your child to the foods they used to enjoy. For desserts, this is different depending on the person.

One question you could ask yourself is, “How often did my child eat desserts before the eating disorder?”

Offering some of their known favorite desserts after dinner and having them available in the home can provide opportunities for your child to challenge their eating disorder thoughts and reunite with the pleasures of eating their favorite desserts again.



Hunger/Fullness Cues

As your child moves through recovery, you may notice that they become full after eating a minimal amount of food. This is a common sensation that occurs as a result of ignoring hunger/fullness cues for a long period of time. The body eventually stops sending these cues and without these cues regulated, it can be hard to know when you are truly hungry or full.

As a parent, one of the best things you can do is ensure your child is completing 100% of their meal plan prescribed by their dietitian. **The #1 goal is making sure your child is receiving adequate nutrition.** Even though your child may feel full after completing half of their plate, it is always important they finish 100% of each meal and snack to ensure they are properly re-nourishing their bodies and working towards re-regulating their hunger/fullness cues. Often in the beginning stages of following our meal plans, your child may be practicing mechanical eating until their hunger/fullness cues return.

Mechanical eating involves eating in a regular eating pattern to restore hunger and fullness cues, typically going no longer than 3-4 hours without a meal or snack.

Eventually, as your child progresses in their recovery, their brain and stomach will begin communicating with each other again and appetite will restore.

Intuitive Eating

When your child's appetite restores, along with normal vitals and avoiding engaging in eating disorder behaviors, your child may shift to relying more on their hunger/fullness cues to guide their food choices (known as intuitive eating) versus the meal plan. When your child reaches the stage of intuitive eating, it is important to support them in honoring their hunger/fullness cues. Examples of hunger cues include:

- Your stomach growling
- Feeling lightheaded
- Feeling irritable
- Feeling a lack of energy

Examples of fullness cues include:

- Your stomach feels full
- Noticing the food is starting to not taste as appealing compared to the first bite
- Feeling satisfied

Honoring these cues fosters a positive relationship between food and our body. At this stage of recovery, it will be important to let your child's cues guide them to eat when they are hungry and stop when they are satisfied. Requiring your child to finish every last bite of food on their plate even if they are full or requiring them to eat dinner when it's ready even if they are not hungry would not be honoring their hunger cues.

Changing Our Language Around Body Image

Several people with eating disorders experience body dysmorphia, body checking, daily weighing, excessive exercising, and other behaviors that fixate on weight and body image. These behaviors may be brought on by many factors, but often, social media, magazine covers, unrealistic body expectations, and language surrounding weight and body image feed into the beginnings of these behaviors. While there is nothing we can do about how much photoshopping/editing magazines and social media accounts will do, nor about fad diet crazes and weight loss commercials, what we can do is promote positive language surrounding weight and body image in our home and around our friends and family.

Body-Neutrality

Weight loss is typically seen as a marker of health and beauty that many people strive for. While weight loss may result as a side effect of nutritional or exercise-related changes, this should not be praised or treated as an event to be sought after. When looking at making changes for our health, the focus should be on factors like:

- How we feel
- Our energy levels
- Our focus
- Better sleep
- Improved mood

Shifting conversations about exercise and nutrition from a focus on weight loss and numbers on the scale to a focus on the above factors and those alike is an effective way to promote a body-neutral perspective.

Body-neutrality is a term to describe having respect for your body, dismissing emphasis on how our body looks, and placing it on all that our bodies can do for us, such as running, playing sports, dancing, and hugging our loved ones.

Making changes that are motivated by cultivating this respect for our bodies' abilities should be the aim for making health-related changes.

Putting It Into Action

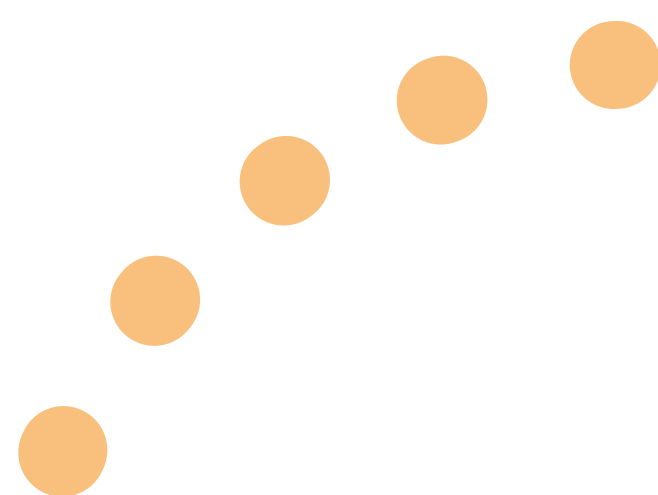
Becoming mindful of conversations around weight loss is a good first step. For instance, you may notice yourself referring to a friend's recent weight loss by saying:

→ “Sarah lost 20 pounds, she looks so good! I wish I could lose that much weight.”

You may reflect on how this promotes a relationship around exercising to lose weight, rather than to nourish your body and feel strong. You may try rephrasing this to say:

→ “Sarah has been going to the gym a lot lately and says she feels much more energized and focused at work. Maybe I should consider incorporating more movement in my day to help me feel more productive.”

Notice how the second statement places the conversation around how we feel rather than the number on the scale. It may also be helpful to try using the word “movement” in place of “exercise.” This helps promote the idea that any type of movement is beneficial for the health of our bodies. Structured workouts at a gym are not the only way to reap the benefits of physical activity.

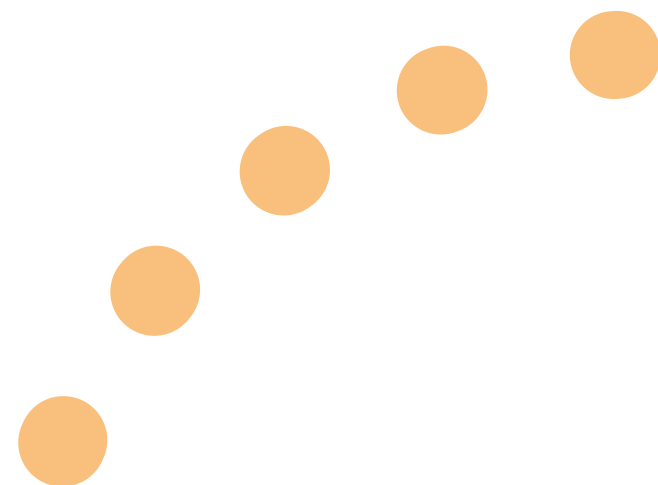


A Dietitian's Role in Recovery

The dietitian's role in your child's eating disorder recovery includes:

- Ensuring adequate nutritional needs are met amongst restriction or purging
- Evaluating weights and vitals
- Collaborating with doctors & therapists
- Challenging eating disorder thoughts
- Educating on what food does for us and why we need to eat
- Creating a meal plan

We will focus more on the meal plans next to help you best understand their role and importance.



Meal Plans

For those who are learning to disengage with eating disorder behaviors, regain their hunger and fullness cues, and properly renourish their bodies, a meal plan is prescribed to ensure adequate nutritional needs are met. At Pearls of Nutrition, we follow exchange-based meal plans that focus on incorporating all food groups into meals.

Exchanges are different food groups: starch, protein, fat, dairy, fruit, vegetable, combination, or snack.

They are a way to categorize foods without focusing on calories. It is a system that allows for added flexibility, incorporation of all foods, and portion education. For example, a dinner may include 2 starches, 2 fats, 3 proteins, 2 vegetables, and 1 dairy. From there, your child may choose which type of starch, fat, protein, vegetable, and dairy they want to include with that meal.

Your child's dietitian will prescribe a meal plan that is appropriate for their individual needs, adjust as necessary, and work with them to make their meal plan achievable. It is important that the meal plans are 100% completed to ensure adequate nutrition is being received. It may be helpful to include your child when creating your grocery list and review their meal plan with them to make sure they have foods in the house they enjoy that are also in alignment with their meal plan.

We hope this guide has offered clarification to confusing topics and provided you with an understanding of some of the ways you can support your child throughout their recovery. Making the adjustments to navigating language, hunger/fullness cues, and meal planning might take some time, but the hope is that you feel you have a clear idea of where to start and what your role as the parent in your child's eating disorder recovery looks like. If you need any clarification on any topics discussed, please be sure to reach out to your child's dietitian for any questions/concerns.