

# What is the Best Way to Help My Child Who is Struggling With an Eating Disorder?

Most likely you as parents have often wondered. *What is the best way to help? What can I do or say that will help break through into their world and change their way of thinking? What eating disorder behaviors should I watch for and call out? When should I be silent and when should I step in?*

As someone with an eating disorder, I want to try to give you an idea of what we want or need from the support people in our lives.

First of all, provide balanced meals. Moms, make sure you prepare nutritious foods that include all the food groups. If it's not served, we won't eat it. Most of us have certain foods we consider okay and many foods we label as bad. Be aware of what we are eating – or avoiding. In the moment, we want you to leave us alone so we can eat the way we feel we need to, but what we need is you to sit down with us and help us eat the scary foods. Don't let us skip certain food groups and just think, “well, at least she's eating something.” We need you to challenge the eating disorder on every front. If you let us avoid certain foods, the list of bad foods will get longer and longer, and the foods that we are okay with will just get fewer and fewer. Eating together, as a family, is a support in helping us to not skip meals.

Watch for eating disorder behaviors. There's skipping food groups, but there's a lot more. They include: slowly picking at our food, chopping it into tiny pieces, reading nutrition labels and obsessing about them, not finishing our meal, hiding or throwing away food, or mashing food into one big pile to make it look like more or less than it is. Also, watch for sneaking food between meals. We become so hungry that we are driven to eat. Our body demands it. In our hunger we binge eat. We can't stop. This is very dangerous behavior because our mind cannot be okay with what we have done, and we will end up purging or restricting later. We need help to eat the appropriate amount regularly so that we don't get those intense cravings that lead us to binge.

And no, we can't do it on our own. We need you to sit with us and support us. Make sure we take an appropriate amount and make sure we finish it. Please understand, we are not being stubborn. The voices in our

head are so loud and controlling that we feel we can't eat – even like it's morally wrong. Be a healthy voice assuring us of the truth.

Monitor bathroom use after meals. It's a good idea to have us wait to use the bathroom for a least an hour after eating. It lessens the urge to purge what we've eaten.

Please remove the scales! The scales is not a help to us in any way. If you need to monitor our weight, make sure we don't see the number.

If we have doctor or dietitian appointments, go along. It's a chance to educate yourself about what we're going through, and what we need you to do. We need your support. An eating disorder is very lonely, and we need to know that someone cares and understands. Parents, if you and your son, or daughter, are not able to communicate about their struggles, find someone who can. Find a trustworthy person, who can support them, talk to them, and go with them to appointments. We need someone to be accountable to – someone who makes sure we do the hard work. We need someone to gently but firmly keep us on track.

No, we don't want you to be involved, but we need it. What we want is to hide in a corner by ourselves so it's just us and our eating disorder. It's extremely hard to interact with others. The eating disorder is the shell that protects us from the outside world. We want to crawl into that shell and be left alone, but the worst thing you can do let us isolate. It gives us too much time to think, to focus on how we feel, and to hear the haunting voices in our head. We need to be kept occupied with profitable things. We long to be alone. We feel we need it, but it's not good for us.

Above all, don't ignore the eating disorder. It's very hard to walk through, but if you ignore it, we are on our own and it will get worse. And it's simply not a journey we can walk alone. Don't be so scared of doing the wrong thing that you do nothing. We do not need to be scolded or shamed for the things we do – the eating disorder takes care of that. We do need someone to listen. Listen to how horrible we feel. Listen to our fears. And let us talk about all the information we've gathered about food, whether it's true or not. We need to be able to get it out. Don't cut us off and tell us we shouldn't feel that way. Just counteract the lies with truth.

Tell us the facts of what is good in the food we need to eat when all we see is the bad. Help us to look at rationally. Did it actually hurt us? Has it done all the things we say it will do? What would we tell someone else who is struggling? Remind us again and again of our value outside of how we

look. Help us see the things that really matter. The more you help us see how precious we are *just the way we are*, the less power the eating disorder will have.

In summary, we need you to be aware of what we are going through. Watch for the behaviors that keep us stuck in our eating disorder, and call out those behaviors. Make sure we get the nutrition we need, because the best prescription for an eating disorder is food. Even though we want to avoid it, we cannot get better without facing food. Support us through the rough times and celebrate with us in victories. Keep us accountable to the behaviors don't become habits. Keep us involved in daily life. Help us do things we enjoy. Be there for us. Even though you don't have all the answers, just the feeling that someone cares and is trying to understand, makes a huge difference. You can't say some magic words to make the eating disorder vanish, but your support can give us courage to not give up on the path to recovery.