



# Parents Survive to Thrive Guide

A resource guide for parents of  
a child with an eating disorder.  
Written by parents with  
lived experience.



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BC Children's Hospital has developed a resource to provide parents with tools, tips, advice, and strategies on how to navigate the challenges of having a child with body image and eating issues. The uniqueness of this resource is that it has been written by parents with firsthand experience having a child who has experienced an eating disorder. We would like to express our gratitude for the more than 150 responses we received from parents who shared helpful strategies in managing their child's recovery. Thank you, to everyone who contributed – your strength, insight, advice, and encouragement are inspiring and invaluable.

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## Disclaimer

The Parent Resource Guide (the “Guide”) is intended to provide information as an aid to parents of children struggling with eating disorders, and to help in the development of healthy strategies to overcome these disorders. The Guide was written by parents of children who have struggled with an eating disorder, and contains suggestions on how to reduce disordered eating behaviours. The Guide is not intended as a substitute for the advice of an appropriate health care professional, and no person may rely upon any information contained in the Guide for any reason whatsoever. If professional advice is required, the services of a competent and qualified professional should be sought. Decision-making in a specific context remains the responsibility of attending professionals. Nothing contained in the Guide should in any way be construed as being either official or unofficial policy of British Columbia Mental Health Society Branch, Children’s & Women Health Centre of British Columbia Branch or Provincial Health Services Authority (together the “Societies”). The Societies assume no responsibility or liability arising from any error in or omission of information or from the use of any information, link, contact, opinion or advice provided in the Guide.

# INTRODUCTION

*“You CAN do this. As Winston Churchill said, ‘you’re walking through hell - KEEP GOING!’”*

The often long and difficult process of recovering from an eating disorder can drain a parent or caregiver of both physical and emotional energy. It is common to feel helpless, confused, frustrated and exhausted at times. Whether your child has been newly diagnosed with an eating disorder, or has been struggling for some time, this guide can help. It was created to offer parents ideas, advice, tips, tools, and helpful strategies from other parents and caregivers who have been through the recovery process with their own child. The guide is consistent with a family-centered approach, and we hope that the experience of others can help you provide your child with the support they need. By creating this guide, our goal is to empower parents and caregivers to play an active role in their child’s recovery, and to also support them in addressing and overcoming common feelings of despair and hopelessness. We hope by reading the words of other families who have walked in your shoes, you will gain some insight, understanding, and - most importantly - the awareness that you are not alone.

# CHAPTER 1: WHAT TO DO IF YOU'RE CONCERNED

It is not easy to watch your child do damage to their health - especially when the solution appears, at least on the outside, to be simple. Eating disorders are not simple. They are not only about food or weight. So what can you do when you suspect that your child may have an eating disorder? Knowing the first steps to take and how to approach the situation can make a huge difference.

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## What signs, symptoms, and characteristics could I be looking for?

*"It is so subtle, often hard to notice. If you think something is not right; follow your instincts, seek help."*

People with eating disorders display a wide range of symptoms. Some signs can be more obvious than others: dramatic weight loss, a refusal to eat, retreating to the bathroom for long periods after meals. There are also more subtle signs that are often overlooked. Here are some signs and symptoms that parents have suggested you could look for.

### **PERSONALITY TRAITS**

- Wants to be perfect at everything
- Obsessions with routine

### **PHYSICAL CHANGES**

- More hair on body or losing head hair
- Rapid weight fluctuations
- Brittle nails



## What signs, symptoms, and characteristics could I be looking for? (continued)

*"If your child's friends reach out (to their parents or guidance counsellor) expressing concern about your child, you must take that very seriously. Friends can often be the first to know there is a problem."*

- Always being cold
- Loss of period
- Puffy face
- Glassy eyes
- Bad breath
- Wearing baggy clothes more often

### **BEHAVIOURS**

- Counting calories and having difficulty eating food without knowing the calories and/or ingredients
- Sudden interest in wanting to shop for groceries or feed other members of the family; always keen to bake for others
- Always watching cooking television shows, reading recipes, diet books, food magazines, etc.
- Disappearing to the bathroom during meals
- Constant thoughts of being fat and/or ugly; spending an excessive amount of time in front of mirrors
- Avoidance of everything: life, leisure activities, friends, food, and family
- Difficulty concentrating, dressing, and focusing
- Early morning jogs before anyone wakes up and/or immediately exercising after meals
- Cutting marks on arms or legs or in hidden places on their body



## How do I talk to my child about my concerns?

*"Instead of something like, 'I know you are purging and it's going to hurt you,' try, 'I can see that you are having struggles right now, and you seem sad and distant.'"*

*"Be honest. Let your child know you have some concerns and address what is bothering you. Be open and willing to listen and not judge."*

### HAVE OPEN DIALOGUE

- Approach your child with concern and without judgement. Try not to blame or make accusations. Recognize the effects of the eating disorder on your child and not just their actions.
- Try to maintain an open and ongoing dialogue with your child. This is a life-threatening disease, so we have to make that part of the conversation.
- Try: "I am noticing you are not yourself, having mood swings, always cold. I can feel something is bothering you. Is there anything you want to share with me? Know that I am here for you always. I love you no matter what you are going through. Help me to understand what you're going through."
- Do not comment on weight or appearance! And be careful not to tell them to "just eat." Instead, reinforce that you are there for them no matter what, that they seem to be struggling with some feelings around food and eating or body image, and get permission to discuss it.
- Emphasize how important any effort towards wellness is, and acknowledge all positive efforts, no matter how small.

### BE DIRECT AND FIRM

- Try saying to your child, "Hey, I'm a bit worried about you. You aren't doing fun things very much anymore, and you're being a bit weird about food. Let's go to the doctor."
- Approach the topic firmly but lovingly. Understand that your child will almost certainly deny that there's a problem. Schedule an appointment with a doctor immediately.
- Use factual information such as "I have noticed that you do not seem to be eating foods you used to like, or as much food as typical." "You seem to want to be away from the family, low in mood." "I am concerned about your health."
- Negotiation and compromise are counter-productive. Talking with your child about your concerns can result in circular arguments, because those struggling with eating disorders typically don't perceive that they are ill or have a problem with eating.
- Think about how you would talk to your child if they showed symptoms of a different disease like the flu, or something even more serious. Then use that same tone of concern to express that you believe your child is ill and needs medical attention right away.

### PREPARE YOURSELF

- Manage your own emotions. Be honest, calm, consistent and loving. Try to avoid becoming emotional and angry.
- Research as much as you can by reading books that promote family as part of the solution and learn about what to say, what not to say, and most importantly, when to say nothing.





# What can I do when everyone is telling me that my child is okay, when I know they are struggling with an eating disorder?

*"Believe in yourself and don't give up."*

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### **To family and friends:**

*"I'm their parent and something is definitely wrong. But of course, we are seeking medical advice."*

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### **To medical professionals:**

*"Can you do some blood work please? I have been raising my child for x amount of years and I know something is wrong." Don't give up!"*

As a parent, you have intuitive feelings and knowledge about your child. You know your child better than anyone else. So what can you do when others think you are overreacting?

### **FOLLOW YOUR INSTINCTS**

- Find the evidence to convince the doctors that there is a problem and your child needs treatment. No one, absolutely no one else matters but your child.
- Trust your intuition. If you suspect something is wrong, it almost certainly is. I've never known a parent to worry without some cause for concern.
- Let the other people know you have concerns that are real and not going away. No one can advocate better than a parent for their child.

### **LOOK FOR SUPPORT**

- Seek the help of eating disorder-knowledgeable and experienced clinicians, parents, and caregivers.
- Join a parent support group either in person or online...many times parents who have been there before are the best source of information and support.
- Read some authoritative books and see your family doctor for a base weight, height, blood pressure and heart rate. Don't give up!

### **EDUCATE YOUR FRIENDS AND FAMILY**

- Explain that eating disorders are a mental health problem and you can't see what is going on inside a person's mind. It's not always what a person looks like.
- Educate your family and friends so they become part of your support team; if they can't be helpful, then limit your time with them - you are in a fight for your child's life - they are not dying - your child is.
- Tell them that you've been doing some research and that in fact, there is a problem. Be helpful by offering the articles/books you've researched to validate your concerns.
- Keep in mind that most people do not understand eating disorders. Some people even still believe that parents can cause eating disorders, which is entirely untrue, so you must try to thank them for their concern but ignore their bad advice.



## Who could I talk to, to address my concerns?

*“Talk to everyone who will listen. Hiding, secrecy and avoidance perpetuate the illness.”*

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*“Do not waste time with professionals who are not well versed in eating disorders.”*

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*“One of the first persons I discussed my concerns with was my significant other. Together we created a united front against the eating disorder.”*

If you are concerned that your child is struggling with an eating disorder, it is important to seek support sooner rather than later. The longer a person is struggling with an eating disorder, the longer it will take to recover. Who could you talk to about these concerns? It is important to seek out health care professionals that are specifically trained to work with children and youth. Below are some ideas that parents shared with us.

### PROFESSIONALS

- Your primary care doctor can be the first line of defense. Then look into options like therapists or eating disorders programs.
- Family doctor, trusted counsellor, psychologist, psychiatrist, social worker - make sure any professional you talk to has some experience with eating disorders - if they don't, they just don't get it - move on and find someone else.
- Do not rest until you've talked to every expert you can find. Search the web and make phone calls to those experts who seem to speak to you over the internet.

### FAMILY MEMBERS

- Parents are encouraged to talk with one another and develop a plan together for establishing responsibility for supervising every meal and snack.

### EDUCATORS

- School teachers, guidance counsellors, principal of the school - anyone at the school who is an educator I found to be extremely helpful.

### PEERS

- Become involved in a parent support group both offline and online if possible.
- Use resources like NIED.ca and NEDIC.ca to find support networks. Investigate support groups for parents/friends/family members so you can share experiences.
- Get involved with the forums at FEAST-ED.org (ATDT.org) and listen to the parents there.

# CHAPTER 2

## DIAGNOSIS OF AN EATING DISORDER

When your child has been diagnosed with an eating disorder, it is natural to feel frightened. Remember that although it may not always be easy, recovery is possible. Many of the parents who contributed to this guide have a child who has recovered from their eating disorder, and your child can get there too.

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### Is my child's diagnosis my fault? If not, how is it not my fault?

*"Don't let anyone tell you it's your fault!"*

#### **AN EATING DISORDER IS A COMPLEX MENTAL HEALTH DISORDER**

- It is not your fault because it is a biologically-based brain disorder that requires a perfect storm of genetic predisposition, temperament, environment, and so on. It could be kicked off by weight loss through diet, illness, huge growth spurt, etc. It really doesn't come down to you. And if you can't get past that, tell yourself that you will read, learn and tolerate everything that you can and that you WILL get your child better no matter what you think started it. Pick yourself up and soldier on. No point looking for answers, you need to move forward.
- It is out of your control or ability to give your child an eating disorder.
- Sometimes I think my own body image comments taught my child negative thinking patterns about themselves, but an eating disorder is much more complicated than just one factor. My child says that it's like a math equation: a(genetics) + b(cultural messages) + c(peer group) + d(family stress)+e(body issues) = an eating disorder.



## Is my child's diagnosis my fault? If not, how is it not my fault? *(continued)*

*"You wouldn't blame yourself if your child was diabetic, so it isn't your fault your child has an eating disorder."*

### **BLAME INTERFERES WITH ACTION TOWARD RECOVERY**

- No family is perfect, and some experience problems. But many children come out of those families without eating disorders. Blaming is pointless. The real issue is to get the child help now. Steer clear of therapy that suggests that the family dynamic is to blame.
- It is very important for parents NOT to feel guilty, because while parental behaviour cannot cause the disease, parental behaviour is a big part of the most successful treatment. So get help and educate yourself; you didn't cause the disease but you can help your child to full recovery! Guilt and anger are not constructive for moving forward.
- Parents are an essential part of recovery; not the fault, not the problem.

## Is it okay to talk about my child's diagnosis with others?

*"I believe it is a personal decision on what to tell and to whom."*

Eating disorders affect the entire family. Keeping the eating disorder a secret may lead to more stress, particularly if you need the support from others. Before you open up about your child's eating disorder, think through your child's feelings, your reasons for telling someone else about it, and what you expect of them.

### **CHALLENGE STIGMA**

- Talking about eating disorders will take away the stigma and encourage others to get their children treated.
- It's good to help others understand that eating disorders aren't a choice, they are an illness.
- Secrets fuel the eating disorder. Secrets fuel stigma.
- Telling others might make them less likely to trigger your child by saying something improper, such as about their appearance.

### **INVOLVE YOUR CHILD**

- It could be up to your child to decide who to tell and when. Of course, feel free to discuss this with your personal therapist or doctor, but not with your friends and extended family unless your child gives you permission. It's an issue of respect.
- I am honest and open when people ask how my child is doing. But before this, I had made sure they were okay with me letting others know.
- Depends on your level of comfort and your child's comfort.
- Your parental instincts will enable you to know who to trust with your child's personal information.



## Is it okay to talk about my child's diagnosis with others? *(continued)*

*"This is tricky. Your child won't want you to tell others, and there are situations in which it's best not to broadcast it. But you need some sort of support. Choose a few close friends who you can trust."*

### **CORE SUPPORT**

- I had one person that I talked to about it all the time, who helped me through the hard times. I found it difficult to keep to myself.
- Find a core few that you can talk with, and get support from parents who are going through what you are going through.

### **COME PREPARED**

- It is so important to start the conversation and help others understand. Understanding what is helpful and what is destructive is critical. Generally speaking, people do not understand eating disorders; there is blame directed at the individual and the family, and this is not appropriate, helpful or beneficial. These are difficult conversations. If someone does not understand or is negative or non-supportive, they may cause more harm than good.
- Be prepared for them to not understand the full horror of living with an eating disorder in the house. You will lose friends and gain new friends in this journey.
- The treatment for eating disorders will require you to talk with other adults who will be supervising your child at mealtimes, to make sure everyone is on the same page.



## What can I do if my child doesn't think anything is wrong?

*"My child's acknowledgment of a problem is not a necessity for treatment."*

*"Know that this is a natural part of the disease. Don't take your child's denial as a measure of health. It's just a symptom of the disease."*

Especially during the early stages of an eating disorder, it is common for the person who is struggling to deny that there is anything wrong. Denial of the issue can be a symptom of the eating disorder. In many cases it takes a lot of time before a person is ready and able to face the eating disorder and acknowledge it, so parents may have to be the driving force in seeking support.

### TAKE CHARGE

- It does not matter. You are the parent. You have to be in charge. Would you ignore it if it was cancer? No.
- Seek out treatment anyway, as your child will not have any comprehension or understanding that they are sick. Their brain is starved and will not be able to process thoughts that let them recognize or understand that they are sick.
- If your child was anything like mine, then they will think you are being annoying and invasive. They will be secretive, lie and deceive; it is the disease. Eating disorders are insidious and extremely difficult to deal with. By the time you realize something is not right, the disease is firmly entrenched; you have no time to lose. Seek treatment and do your research as soon as you suspect something.

### FOCUS ON HEALTH

- If your child is an adult, be supportive in healthy living and setting a good example for your child. Provide resources for counselling or encourage them to attend a support group.
- Try to show your child the things they used to love to do, but now feel too sick to enjoy them anymore. Remind them of how nice it would be to find joy in these things again.
- Keep trying to show your child that their behaviour is unhealthy and unsafe. Don't ignore their behaviour. Keep talking even if they don't want to listen - but try to be gentle and careful with your words, not judgmental or critical. Be loving, understanding, and compassionate.
- Remember that they don't want to live in this hell, but they are trapped by it. You need to help your child get free. Keep focusing on your child's health and well-being. Keep asking how they feel, and offer empathy, not pity.



## What are some coping mechanisms I can use for myself?

*“I try never to let my guard completely down or to secretly jump for joy. I try to just take each day as it comes and continue to reflect on how things are for them, how things are for the family, and what pressures are coming up, so that I am as prepared as I can be to support my child if they experience difficulties.”*

*“Find people who are going through the same situation and lean on them. Go into this with your eyes wide open – it will take a long time.”*

It is common for parents to feel a range of emotions through this journey, starting with their child’s diagnosis, and throughout. Guilt, frustration and blame are just a few emotions that are common for parents of a child with an eating disorder. Remembering to have self-compassion is extremely important. Here are some coping mechanisms that other parents have found helpful in managing their feelings about their child’s illness and recovery process.

### ACCEPTANCE

- It is a hard thing to cope with. But what I learned is that everyone has their own problems, and it’s ok if your family isn’t perfect.
- It is hard because society makes it seem like eating disorders are the family’s fault, which is not true. You do start to think, “where did we go wrong?”, but when you get past that, it becomes easier and you can focus better on your child’s illness.
- Take a lot of deep breaths and you will shed a lot of tears in the process, but that’s ok, it’s all worth it.
- It is tough. Probably the toughest thing I’ve ever dealt with. You can do it.
- Recognize that it’s a process and a journey, so try to keep calm and take things day by day. It is all-consuming.

### SELF-CARE

- Make sure you take time for yourself. Time to vent your frustrations and clear your thoughts. For myself, I found a counsellor and went for regular massages. Understand that you’ll likely be experiencing some post-traumatic stress.
- Try to remain healthy for yourself and don’t let the issue consume your life. This will only cause shame and guilt for the child.
- Try journaling daily. Getting those feelings out allows you to cope with all the stuff that comes with a child with an eating disorder.
- We all have to accept things we cannot change. Find a project that will give you some joy and make lifestyle adjustments to promote your child’s recovery and give you the time to care for them and yourself.
- Do emotional work on yourself so that your feelings don’t transfer to your child. It is horrible to watch your child suffer, I know.

### SUPPORT

- Seek support from other parents/caregivers that have been through it. I think you have to adjust to a “new normal.” Things might not be the same as they were, but a new way of living together is possible.
- Try to enlist at least one other adult to help with the regime and be sure that all immediate family members know how to best support your child.



## What are some coping mechanisms I can use for myself? *(continued)*

*“Know you are not alone. There are too many other families who are dealing with this disorder. Never give up hope. It is like you are preparing for battle; it takes courage, strength, determination - you become a warrior.”*

*“I try to take any break that is offered. I have even dropped my child off at their grandparents a few times with specific eating instructions and then I just take an evening for me. You have to take care of yourself every once in a while. You just have to.”*

- Find a support system - you'll need it for a long time. Make sure to take care of yourself. Attend to the other needs in your family.
- Get yourself help and support. You are in for a very painful journey and you can't do it alone. You will make sacrifices - huge sacrifices, so leave some space for your needs or the eating disorder will try to take you down too.
- Get the whole family to be united in their approach to help the child with the eating disorder.
- Talk it out. I made a list of how could we do things differently.

### **NON-BLAMING**

- Don't ever blame yourself. Become an expert about eating disorders and then put your shoulder to the wheel and go to work.
- Remember that this isn't your fault.
- Remind yourself it is a normal part of recovery. It is not a weakness or a failure.
- Take it one day at a time, one moment of a time. Sometimes one meal at a time.



# CHAPTER 3

## MANAGING EATING DISORDER BEHAVIOURS

Learning how to understand and better manage behaviours associated with an eating disorder can be challenging. It's important to keep reminding yourself that everything your child is saying and doing is part of their illness. Sometimes it can be difficult to know what to say or how to respond. These stories from other parents are intended to help you better understand and react to eating disorder behaviours when they arise.

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### What are some reasons it is difficult for my child to eat?

*"Fear, fear, fear. Fear of food, fear of losing control, fear of fat, fear of so many things. They simply cannot eat or understand the need to. The eating disorder voice in their head is very loud, very controlling and very manipulative."*

You might already be aware that getting your child to eat is a big endeavour and is often paired with arguments and strong emotions. Why is it so difficult for your child to eat? Below are some reasons parents came to understand through their experience.

#### **FEAR**

- Fear. Their brain bullies them into not eating.
- They are literally afraid of the food. Not eating is self-soothing, so that's what they choose.
- Fear of judgment. Fear they will lose control.
- My child has an intense fear that they are going to be fat from eating just one meal. They have great difficulty eating a variety of foods, and it takes a lot of strength for my child to eat their meals.



## What are some reasons it is difficult for my child to eat? *(continued)*

*“There is a voice in your child’s mind telling them that they cannot eat or else they will get fat. It’s not that they don’t want to eat, it’s that they truly can’t. The only way to make this voice quieter, however, is to eat.”*

### **ANXIETY & CONTROL**

- Your child’s thinking and thought process in their malnourished brain are overloaded with anxiety about food.
- Your child may be feeling out of control in their world, and eating is one thing they can 100% control.
- Your child is worried about gaining weight, calories, and feeling full.

## What can I do to make it easier for my child to eat?

*“Remember that each child is different, so there is no “one size fits all” solution. As a parent, you need to experiment at mealtime to see what works for your child and your family. However, the goal is weight gain and re-establishment of normal patterns of eating behaviour, not necessarily conflict-free mealtimes. In fact, you can often avoid conflict by allowing your child to eat small meals. In the short-term, this seems good because it reduces conflict. In the long term, however, it merely allows your child to remain ill. So the goal is not necessarily to make it easier for your child, not at first.”*

As a parent, you play an important role in your child’s recovery, and one of the most important things you can do is to provide support during meal time. Below are some suggestions from other parents on how to best support your child in getting proper nourishment.

### **BE STRONG AND PRESENT**

- Be there for them every bit of the way. Even if you just sit with them at the table and read a book or sit and talk with them, just be there. It helps them understand that you really do care.
- Be a solid wall. No negotiations. Repeat to your child that food is medicine.
- Eat all meals and snacks with your child. Stay calm and encourage them to eat.
- In the beginning, take total responsibility for making your child eat so they won’t have to feel guilty or anxious if making a choice. It can take a long time before they are ready to choose to eat.
- Firm, loving support. Let your child know you will not let them starve, that you are stronger and louder than the eating disorder, and that nothing happens in the family until they eat.



## What can I do to make it easier for my child to eat? *(continued)*

### CREATE A PLAN AND ROUTINE

- Make meal time a calm place. Often music or even videos can help. Keep your child out of the kitchen when cooking and serving their meals. This way there is no fight or discussion about what/how much they will eat.
- Use distraction at meal times. Watching television while they eat can help them to not think so much about the food they are eating. They just need to eat what is on their plate. Don't let anything in life distract from this goal. School, commitments, extra-curricular activities - all of it - can stop until they fully eat.
- Encourage mechanical eating. Pre-plan the meals and don't stray from the plan. Reassure your child that they will feel better when their body is properly nourished.
- Don't watch them eat or talk about food. If your child says they're done and hasn't eaten everything, tell them that we agreed they would eat this meal. Encourage them to take another bite. Keep doing this until they complete their meal.
- In the beginning, it can be helpful to stick to a menu plan so that the child knows in advance what they will need to eat for meals. However, the diet for the first little while can include sufficient calories to allow for rapid weight gain. Once the weight is restored to a more healthy level, it is important to begin to challenge the child with different foods, while sticking to the regular schedule of meals and snacks.



## How can I keep my child from bingeing and/or purging?

*“Help your child ride the wave of the urge to binge and/or purge. Try to limit the tempting food from the house and ensure your child uses the washroom before the meal, so they won’t have to go after.”*

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*“Talk with your child. Explain the side-effects of this horrible cycle and what it can do.”*

The vicious cycle of bingeing and purging takes a toll on your child’s body and emotional well-being. The good news is that this cycle can be broken. Continue reading to learn about some ways you can help your child break this cycle.

### **CREATE RULES AND ROUTINE**

- Secure all foods that are in your cupboards.
- Create a rule that the kitchen closes if it’s not being used for meal preparation or eating. We also said that no family member can access the kitchen after the evening snack.
- Prepare food so your child will get appropriate portions, and try to ensure they don’t go hungry throughout the day.
- Do not permit unaccompanied bathroom or kitchen time. Regularly check the house for food caches.

### **MODIFY THE ENVIRONMENT**

- Stay with your child constantly. Take the lock off the bathroom door - even take your child’s door off its hinges if you need to.
- Create distractions, we would watch funny videos, go for short walks together, listen to music, and so on.
- Remove all the bathroom doors, and try not to let your child to be alone for two hours after each meal or snack.
- Check your child’s room daily, shut the water off so they can’t flush the toilets.



## How can I keep my child from over-exercising?

*“My child would sleep in the same bed as me, and then we rearranged our child’s bedroom so there wasn’t as much floor space.”*

*“Keep in mind that they will get angry with you – but deep down, they will be relieved that you are stopping them.”*

Over-exercising is a compulsion that can become an addiction for your child if they have an eating disorder. Over-exercising is often seen as a way for your child to “punish” their body, and it can do serious mental and physical damage to their health. Below are some ways you can keep your child from over-exercising.

### **SUPERVISE EXERCISE TIME**

- Stay with your child constantly. Unfortunately, everything in your life has to go on hold. Take your child’s bedroom door off its hinges if you need to. Stay with them until they are asleep as they will exercise in the night. I know for myself, I had to sleep in the same room.
- When my child exercised, I tried to go with them just to keep them in check and not go overboard. We’ve stuck to yoga and other relaxation exercises.
- This is so hard. If your child feels they need to exercise, try to offer to go for a walk with them instead of a jog. Suggest they do a weekly recreation plan with you.

### **CREATE RULES AND ROUTINE**

- Keep their bedroom door open. It doesn’t matter if they don’t like it, you’re the parent and they’re sick.
- Remove all of the exercise equipment in the home, including the bike, rollerblades, weights, everything. We would listen for noises in the bathroom (jumping, squats). We spoke with the school to have our child exempted from all gym classes until further notice and made sure they were all keeping an eye out.
- Have firm and confident insistence that your child is not healthy enough to exercise, and vigilance to prevent your child from exercising.



# What is externalizing the eating disorder? Is it helpful?

*“My child thinks of the eating disorder as a nasty roommate that they cannot avoid.”*

*“It is very helpful to think of the eating disorder as a “thing” that has “captured” your child in its clutches. In this way, you are not battling your child, you are battling your child’s enemy. Your child is not willfully disobeying your command to eat, your child is unable to obey because they have lost control. Your child is not a liar and manipulative, they are only doing those things because they are compelled to do so by the eating disorder.”*

You may have heard people referring to an eating disorder as “Ed” or “Ana”. With this strategy, the eating disorder is talked about as separate from the person, therefore helping to put blame on something outside of the individual. While many people find it useful to externalize the eating disorder, it can be a difficult concept to grasp at first. Below are some parents’ thoughts on their experience with externalizing the eating disorder.

## CREATING SEPARATION

- Your child is not the eating disorder. The eating disorder is a disease, an illness to be beaten.
- Externalizing the eating disorder is the process of separating the child from the chaos and ravages of the eating disorder. It is most helpful when the eating disorder is driving all the disruptive behaviors, anger, abuse, etc. The eating disorder is separate from your child. This becomes very apparent as you get further into recovery. Learning to externalize and separate from the eating disorder is about learning it has no real control over your child and it is not a part of your child.

## UNDERSTANDING BEHAVIOURS

- Externalizing my child’s eating disorder helps me not get pulled into the power struggle. It helps me to remember that when my child is angry about eating and calling me names, the behaviour is really the eating disorder.
- It’s helpful to refer to all behaviours as stemming from the eating disorder, not my child.
- Some parents find this helpful. Other parents, including myself, conceptualize the eating disorder as the temporary consequence of semi-starvation.
- Your child is not choosing not to eat or purge, act angry and/or violently toward you or themselves, rather, it is the illness. They want and need your love, help and support even when they push you away. The eating disorder has taken them hostage and they have to listen to it. When you, as their parent, take away their choice to use the eating disorder behaviours, they feel safe even when they cannot tell you this.



## What can I do if my child doesn't want to recover?

*"You can't ever give up on your child. You have to be strong when they can't be."*

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*"Keep having hope that there will be a time when your child will reach out for recovery for themselves."*

### **BE STRONG AND CONSISTENT**

- Whether a child with an eating disorder wants recovery or not is irrelevant. They have to get better despite their declarations. I hold onto recovery until my child is ready to hold onto it themselves.
- Your child doesn't have to want to recover. In fact, they will likely hate recovery – but your job is to support them through it.
- I found it important to give my child hope and let them know there's an excellent chance of making a full recovery. Keep showing your child that their life can be better.
- It's normal, almost expected, for a child to not want to recover. Your role is to support them to the point until they are ready and want to recover, willing to be part of the recovery process. Remember, it is not your child that doesn't want to recover, it is the eating disorder. An eating disorder is very protective and will do anything to escape detection or recovery help.

# CHAPTER 4

## RELAPSE/ MAINTAINING RECOVERY

Recovery from an eating disorder is possible. It can also be hard work for the whole family. Parents can take steps to help prevent their child's relapse and maintain a positive recovery. In this section, we talk about what to expect during your child's recovery process.

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### What can I do to maintain my child's health and stability?

*"Parents could show their child that they are being vigilant and point out any troublesome behaviours as they occur, even after the eating disorder is in remission. At some point, you can expect your child to recognize their own tendency for disordered eating and to express a desire to stay healthy with respect to eating behaviour."*

As a parent, it is common to feel a bit uncertain about how to give your child the right support throughout their recovery. You've likely come a long way to get your child's health to where it is – but how can you maintain this and prevent your child from experiencing a relapse?

#### **BE ATTENTIVE TO THEIR NEEDS**

- Make sure your child is eating all of their meals. My child had to go to the nurse at school to eat their lunch and was seeing an eating disorder therapist frequently.
- I have adapted my routine and behaviours to make sure I am really meeting my child's emotional needs wherever possible. I accept that my child might still be anxious about things and support them with that. I also make sure my child always has something fun to work towards or look forward to so that they want to keep healthy to enjoy it.
- Stay engaged in your child's life, monitor routine and get involved if things start sliding.
- During a stable eating time, ask your child what things they would like you to do in order to help them get back on track. Write these down during the conversation and use them if need be.





## What can I do to maintain my child's health and stability? *(continued)*

*“Remind your child that food is their medicine. Maintain positivity and treat them like a normal individual once recovery starts to really set in.”*

### **BE CONSISTENT**

- Put protections in place. My family found that regular weigh-ins are important, even after weight restoration.
- Stay the course, but have plans for any slips. Recognize your child's triggers and help to prevent those.
- Continue with ongoing support and talking to them to ensure open communication. Encourage regular checkups with the doctor and make sure all medications are being taken.



## What can I do if I start to see signs of relapse?

*“The minute you notice, seek treatment.”*

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*“Nip it quickly. When our child starts to feel like they want to restrict, we quickly re-engage our family-based approach. We watch carefully, monitor their eating, and contact their therapist and doctors right away.”*

Relapse is a common and expected part of the recovery process, yet it can still be incredibly distressing for both the parents and child. Both the child and their family members may experience feelings of failure, shame, and frustration. Being prepared, and knowing how to recognize and respond to signs of relapse can help reduce anxiety and get things back on track more quickly.

### **TALK TO YOUR CHILD**

- Calmly talk to your child about your concerns and notify your child’s doctors and therapists right away.
- Remind them of the importance of not missing meals and snacks. Communication is key – tell your child they are slipping.
- Ask your child if they can help you understand what is going on so you can help.
- Ask your child what you can do to be supportive.

### **TAKE CONTROL**

- Stop everything and make a plan.
- Push food, take a step backwards and support eating more.
- Immediately step up the care and medical support.
- Go back to re-feeding as soon as possible. The earlier you catch a relapse, the easier it is to deal with.
- Take back control—push and assert your parental rights.



## Are we back at the beginning if my child has relapsed?

*“It may feel like you’re back at the beginning because the rules are the same, but something is always learned. Keep going.”*

*“The child has taken steps to wellness - just because there is a relapse, doesn’t mean they are at the beginning. They have collected tools along the way. It does feel like the beginning, but we as a family have to move past that.”*

If your child has had a relapse, you may have the feeling that you’re back at square one. However, relapse is a useful and expected part of the recovery process. Remind yourself and your child of all of the gains that they’ve made. No one is perfect, and experiencing relapse doesn’t mean that you’ve lost everything you worked so hard to achieve.

### **RELAPSE IS COMMON AND EXPECTED**

- After a relapse, the time it takes to get back to a healthy place each time is a little less. For some, a relapse is just another step toward recovery.
- To me, it seems that recovery becomes easier after each successive relapse.
- It’s two steps forward, one step backward.

### **REMEMBER SKILLS AND STRATEGIES**

- You will recognize the problem sooner and start the treatment process just as quick. Also, patterns of recovery will already be in place because of your earlier experiences.
- Continue to love and support your child and continue with the strategies and tools that worked in the past.
- You have gained skills to fight the eating disorder already. This is a new challenge, but it’s not the end.
- Many valuable lessons and awareness strategies are learned through the relapse. As long as you don’t let your child slip back to extreme low weights and you keep up with all of the medical appointments, then your child will come through this.



## Will recovery ever come? Will my child be struggling like this forever?

*"I personally think it is a life-long battle. But once your child knows how to manage themselves, I think they can realistically keep themselves from starting the cycle again. They need to know that it is an illness that might stalk them and they have to be ever-vigilant."*

*"It will take time, but us parents need to be consistent and stay educated. There is no way my child will be struggling like this forever."*

It's not easy to watch your child struggle with an eating disorder, and sometimes it can feel like recovery is never going to happen. Each family's recovery journey is different and unique, because each child is unique. Below are some thoughts from other parents on what it felt like to work toward recovery with their child.

### RECOVERY IS POSSIBLE

- Many recover. Some take longer than others, and that's okay. A risk of relapse is always possible.
- Recovery is very possible, especially with your support. Many, many people recover fully from eating disorders and leave them behind.
- People do recover from eating disorders, especially if they are restored to full weight quickly after onset of the illness, i.e. within a few months. My child has been recovered for seven years now and counting!

### LONG JOURNEY

- Recovery will come. It's hard, every day, for a long time. Your child may have days of struggling after recovery, but if they get the right help early and you continue to support them, then they will overcome those not-so-good days.
- I will not stop showing my child the path of recovery, hoping they will walk that way. This is such a long, windy road.
- Everyone's journey is different. Some will recover much sooner than others, some may compromise for years. Recovery is also unique; it differs from person to person. What you think is recovery may not be what your child is able to do. Their recovery will be as they understand it to be. And you will have to accept that.

# CHAPTER 5

## RECOVERY

Overcoming an eating disorder is about more than giving up unhealthy eating behaviours. It is also about rediscovering who you are beyond your eating habits, weight, and body image. This chapter discusses some common questions parents had about their child's recovery.

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### How can I help my child manage the symptoms of discomfort with eating again?

*“Distraction is helpful at the point of eating. Give a lot of love, but stay firm about the importance of eating.”*

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*“Explain that the physical discomfort is just their body coping with them starting to eat again. Fear will be the biggest hurdle and it takes time and constant encouragement to help them overcome this. Small steps.”*

#### **COMMUNICATE AND PROVIDE REASSURANCE**

- Talk to your child – communication is key. Try to do your best in understanding what they are going through.
- Provide calm reassurance that this discomfort is normal in the recovery process and will pass.
- Give your child support, love and encouragement.
- Listen to their worries, validate their feelings, and encourage them to press on.
- Remind your child how well they felt when their body was nourished. Encourage mechanical eating.

#### **MAXIMIZE COMFORT**

- Our family used warm compressors (like a heating blanket), and reassuring that the more they eat the better their belly will feel.
- I had my child wear soft, comfortable loose clothing and gave them weighted blankets. Sometimes even just holding them can help.
- Yoga and some stretching exercises can be helpful.



## What can I do to support my child in having a positive body image?

*“Focus on what our bodies do for us instead of how we look. Make your compliments about personal qualities rather than appearance.”*

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*“Remind your child that their true worth is inside: their creativity, their humour, their ideas, their kindness, their talents, etc. Show proof of their abilities and encourage them to do things that showcase these talents.”*

Whether you realize it or not, your child pays attention to what you do and say. As a parent or caregiver, you play an important role in how your child views their body, and you can help them develop a positive body image during recovery. Below are some strategies that other parents have used to help their child achieve a positive body image.

### SET AN EXAMPLE

- Get rid of your scale, and set an example of loving your own body – whatever shape and size.
- Use positive words when talking about yourself and others.
- Focus on the mind, not the body.
- Try to avoid having a dialogue with your child’s eating disorder; do not engage with their negative self-talk, and do not diet or exercise in their presence.
- Body image may always be a struggle. Do your best to be positive about your own body, and avoid commenting on your child’s or anyone else’s bodies.

### ELIMINATE TRIGGERS

- Remove magazines around the house that can trigger feelings of dissatisfaction about their bodies.
- Eliminate all mirrors in the house. When you bring them back in, put positive messages and notes all around the borders.
- Limit access to fashion magazines, recipe books, diet books, etc. Once your child is fully recovered, you may find that they show little interest in such magazines, which correlates with a more positive body image and healthier lifestyle.



## How can I ensure the whole family is supporting my child in the recovery process?

*“The toll can be high for other children. We would alternate. One spouse would take our son to his doctor or therapist appointments. The other would take the rest of the children out for a special activity. That way our other children felt like we were paying attention to them as well.”*

*“Everyone has to be on the same page. I found this to be very important, having the entire family involved in treatment planning, doctor’s appointments and specialists. We were like one big team ensuring our child was taking their medication and finishing their meals as well as limiting exercise.”*

Recovery from an eating disorder is a team effort, and it’s important for the entire family to be consistent in their response when challenges arise. Here are some ideas about how to ensure that your family is supportive during the recovery process.

### TALK OPENLY

- Talk to your family. Some people may have a harder time understanding the eating disorder than others.
- If you have several children, make sure to include siblings in the conversation as well; eating disorder recovery is a family matter.
- Share your concerns and knowledge. Let your family know what would hurt and help in the recovery process.
- Have calm conversations coupled with good education about what recovery looks like.
- Remind family members not to comment on anyone’s looks or eating habits, and to show compassion.

### INVOLVE THE WHOLE FAMILY

- Involve all members of the family in therapy sessions, and make sure to attend to each family member’s needs throughout the whole process.
- Set rules with other family members about participation in meal times to make sure that their behaviour is supporting the recovery process.
- Ask your family for their help, and give them clear roles. For example: “After dinner, please play scrabble with your sibling.”
- Reassure other family members that they are important too, and that you love them.



## What are some hurdles that can come up during recovery?

*“Christmas was a big one for us. When I came in from the grocery store with several groceries, my child was so overwhelmed with the amount of food they saw. We had to talk about it, and the anxiety was reduced when they realized that we weren’t going to sit and eat the whole two weeks’ worth of shopping in one day.”*

*“Living a normal life, like just going to school or having a sleepover needs plans in place. I had to get the school to supervise snacks and lunches. When our child went to sleepovers, we went after dinner and I had to get parents on board to make sure they ate the snacks, then I would pick them up before breakfast. Finding a way to live as close to a normal existence as possible is essential.”*

*“Stress. Parties. Relationship problems or breakups. Triggers. So many triggers...”*

It’s important to remember that recovery from an eating disorder is not a linear process. It’s common for there to be setbacks, triggers, and other challenges that can sometimes get in the way. Below are some examples of common obstacles that your family may experience as part of the recovery process. Being prepared to manage them can be an important part of successful recovery.

### ANGER, ANXIETY & NEGATIVE COPING MECHANISMS

- Your child may get angry with you often (“You’re making me fat,” etc.), and there will be a lot of arguments, but stay with it. Don’t back down.
- Weight gain causes anxiety. Not using eating disorder behaviours may cause other negative behaviors to start, such as drug and alcohol use. Take it one day at a time.
- A united front is so very important since the eating disorder can come in between relationships. If you are co-parenting your child, do your best to both stay strong and consistent.

### STRESSFUL SITUATIONS

- Going to a restaurant was always a challenge – same with ordering take-out food or going to people’s home for dinner. All very difficult.
- Some of the things that scared my child were irrational. My child was afraid everything would make them fat. They even had to be supervised in brushing their teeth because they were afraid of toothpaste. Everything: shampoo, lotion, bakeries...I just plowed forward. I lotioned my child every day until they were able to do it themselves.
- Flu, sickness, wisdom teeth removed, death in the family, divorce... essentially any stress, real or perceived, was a hurdle.





## How can I help my child see the value of recovery?

*"I honestly believe that recovery is personal. Your child will find their own reason for recovery."*

Recovery will bring your child back, leaving the eating disorder behind. It will bring "life" to your child, add vibrancy, mental freedom, among other things. How can you help your child to see the value in recovery?

### TALK TO YOUR CHILD

- Talk to your child about it and help them understand how sick they are.
- Remind your child of the things that are meaningful to them.
- Help them to see that the eating disorder is lying to them and their life will be better than they can understand once the eating disorder is out of their lives.

### FOCUS ON THE FUTURE

- Have your child think about their goals and ambitions for the future. When they are recovered, they will be able to go on holiday, go out with friends, go to university, develop a career, take part in sports, etc.
- Show your child what they are missing and where in life they could be - how healthy they could be, how much energy and time they would have, etc.
- Remind your child that they won't be able to have the things they want in life if they keep continuing with the eating disorder.
- Give your child hope and a reason to recover.



## How do I know if my child is recovered?

*“Recovery is very interesting and can be different in different people. Some people recover completely and quickly and might never look back. Some people might take longer, but still not have eating disordered thoughts lingering. Some people might still have some eating disordered thoughts pop into their heads that they can let float back out again without needing to act on them. And some people might be recovered but need to actively manage their intrusive thoughts, which they do successfully. All of these people are leading full and healthy lives that are not interrupted by their eating disorder.”*

The path to recovery is different for everyone, and achieving recovery may not look the same for every child. You will likely have to rely on your child to define what recovery looks like for them as an individual. Below are some insights from parents on how they knew their child was recovered.

### **RETURN TO REGULAR SELF**

- You see them start to go back out in the world and do the things they used to do, enjoy life again, have friends again and not be afraid of eating.
- When there is energy, positive thinking, no rules with eating or anxiety, and able to take on normal activities for their age.
- Your child will be themselves again, healthy and happy with normal everyday problems/struggles, but they will not go to the eating disorder to deal with their feelings.
- Try not to put your expectations and perception of recovery onto your child because they may never be able to achieve that. Recovery will be what they can achieve themselves. When they stop eating disordered behaviours, eat normally and flexibly, and live their lives, this is recovery.
- Aside from maintaining a normal weight and normal eating behaviours for over a year, they will also regain their normal sunny personality and take enjoyment in many things again.

### **USE OF COPING TOOLS AND STRATEGIES**

- Your child has the tools to overcome urges or triggers. Signs of recovery include being more responsible, taking care of themselves more independently, being okay with our family still supporting them without becoming angry or aggressive, eating foods that once were scary, eating at restaurants, being able to try different foods with their friends or family, not being occupied or anxious with mealtimes and snacks, being ok with going to the doctor, and becoming an advocate on eating disorders.
- Your child has eating disordered thoughts, but is able to recognize them and counter them with more positive patterns. Or they are able to ride the wave of urges, and seek out help when overwhelmed.

# CHAPTER 6

## SCENARIOS AND SITUATIONS

There are some common situations that families who have a child with an eating disorder may find particularly difficult. Holidays and vacations, shopping for clothing and certain social situations may be stressful. The section below contains suggested strategies from other parents on how they were able to navigate and manage these situations.

### What are some tips for managing holiday times and vacations?

*“We avoided travel and eating out entirely in the beginning as it was too stressful. Our first trip we rented an apartment with a kitchen and we brought our familiar foods with us. Preparation for eating out is important. We discussed which restaurants and what appropriate meals would be composed of, and who would choose them, ahead of time.”*

It’s important to get away, relax, and enjoy time with family and friends. You may find that vacations and holidays can be a particularly stressful time for your family. You and your family can still experience joyful holidays and vacations together. Here are some tips from other parents on managing these challenging situations.

#### **PLAN AHEAD**

- Planning is important. Not rigid planning, but thinking about where you are going, what might be available to eat, what the contingency plan can be to seek an alternative should a meal be inedible, etc.
- Try to think of holidays as just another day - the meal plan is the same. Treating these days like any other day takes the stress off as much as possible.
- Pack snacks to take with you, and stay on schedule as much as possible with regards to meal times.
- Send letters ahead of time to relatives and make simple requests about their behaviour and topics of discussion. It won’t solve all the problems, but it can help.



## What are some tips for managing holiday times and vacations? *(continued)*

*“Our family had secret strategies and codes that we used with each other when in a big gathering or during family dinners. So when my child found they were really struggling, they would say our code, and that would alert me to excuse myself and take my child along with me to see how they are doing.”*

### **BE SUPPORTIVE**

- Expect your child to be stressed during these times, so try your best to stay present with love and support at all times.
- Try to keep things low key, and manage what you can.
- Ask your child what they need. My child appreciated smaller gatherings rather than larger ones, so I always tried my best to accommodate that.
- Try and do fun activities together that don't involve food.
- Find vacations that are educational and interesting.

## What are some ways to make it easier to shop for my child's new clothes?

*“This was very difficult, and I remember walking out of a store crying. My child wanted a size extra small, but I would try to send subtle reminders that all stores make clothes in different sizes – but that was difficult for my child to understand.”*

Because clothing sizes often fluctuate during recovery, there will come a time when you need to buy new clothes for your child. Shopping for clothing can be difficult because of the many mirrors, comparing sizes, and other emotional obstacles that may arise. Continue reading to learn about how other parents managed this delicate situation.

### **TIPS FOR CLOTHES SHOPPING:**

- Order a lot of things that you think they'll like, and let them try the clothes on at home so it's a less stressful environment than in the store.
- Buy the clothing without your child and remove all of the size/tags beforehand.
- Try to avoid shopping for clothes until your child is more stable, medically and mentally, and feels better about their body. It may be awhile before your child can shop with you.
- Stand in front of the mirror in dressing rooms so your child can get a glimpse to see if they like the outfit, but can't see enough to body-check and obsess.
- Try to only shop at stores that have sizing that is true or even runs big. Some stores intentionally have their sizes run small, and those stores could be avoided if possible.
- Try to only purchase stretchy clothes, especially in the beginning, so your child doesn't feel waistbands cutting in as their weight starts to increase.



## How can I handle people making comments about my child's appearance?

*"I'm not shy about saying things in response, like 'He is handsome at any weight.' We do steer clear of those individuals that constantly put their foot in their mouths. One of those people, though, was his grandma. I did have to have a little more specific warnings and suggestions when I emailed her prior to visiting."*

Whether your child is struggling with an eating disorder or in the process of recovery, they are likely to be extremely sensitive to comments made about their weight and appearance. Preparing people in advance, and practicing your response to inappropriate comments can help ease some of the tension and anxiety when these types of situations occur.

### **ADDRESSING COMMENTS ABOUT APPEARANCE:**

- Explain to other people that an eating disorder is an illness, and you are working on helping your child get better.
- If strangers make comments out in public, ignore them, or again, take a stance and explain what an eating disorder is.
- Talk truthfully with people in private, to help them understand.
- Be direct and set boundaries; close friends and family in particular must be aware of what is appropriate to say.

## How can I properly provide structure and meal support for my child when the family is always at work/busy?

*"You need to make meal support your number one priority. Food is the only thing that really matters - it is essential to prioritize this."*

When parents provide structure, it demonstrates that they are being assertive and establishing their parental role in order to support recovery. However, sometimes work and busy schedules can get in the way of providing the structure that's needed. Here are some tips from other parents who have managed to overcome these challenges.

### **TIPS FOR PROVIDING STRUCTURE AND SUPPORT:**

- Try to simplify your life as much as possible during this time.
- Talk to your supervisor at work and with others to make accommodations for time off to supervise meals and snacks.
- Remember that recovery comes first for your child; they may have to temporarily eliminate some activities while recovering.

*"Make adjustments to your lifestyle and count on everyone to help out with meal times."*



## What can I do if I have disagreements with my partner?

*“Get help as soon as possible. Studies show that when caregivers disagree, it is harder for a child to make a full recovery. Present a united front to the child, and postpone any disagreements for later private discussions. My partner and I found email a good way to work out our disagreements.”*

It’s not uncommon for parents to disagree on certain decisions or parenting approaches, but too much conflict can sometimes compound the overwhelming, uncomfortable emotions that the child is already feeling. The important thing to remember is that everyone wants what is best for the child. Below are some strategies that parents have used to manage and prevent disagreements.

### **STAY UNITED & CONNECTED**

- Keep a united front. If you are having an argument, try to do it in private if possible.
- Try to stay on the same page as much as possible. When you aren’t on the same page, do your best to find a middle ground. You may find it helpful to talk to a doctor or therapist.
- Talk and stay connected with your partner, co-parent, or other caregivers for your child.
- Therapy has helped my partner and I. There were some instances when we had to agree to disagree.



## What can I do to manage conflict in the family as a result of the eating disorder?

*“This was a big issue for us. We used family-based therapy appointments, once our child was weight restored and eating nearly ‘normal’, to discuss other conflicts that arose within our family during that stressful time.”*

Family involvement is an important part the treatment of eating disorders for children and youth. It’s also common for conflict to come up, and effectively managing this conflict is important so that the child can continue to see the family as a resource in their recovery, as opposed to a stressor. Below are some strategies that other parents have used in overcoming family conflict.

### COMMUNICATION

- Communication is key. Try to get everyone to understand the illness as best you can.
- Seek professional help from a family therapist.
- Do your best to minimize conflict. Set aside a time to discuss issues that have come up.

### SET BOUNDARIES

- Set boundaries. Allow everyone to have a chance to express feelings.
- Remove your other children for the first few meals during meal support. This might be a good opportunity for a co-parent or caregiver to take your other children out. Over time, try to educate and involve the other children in distracting and supporting your child during meal time.



## How can I make the transition back to school or home easier?

*“When my child came home from the treatment centre, I had the same snacks they had in the centre for my child to bring to school. I also had bought a few plastic food containers and transferred food like cereal or snacks so my child couldn’t calorie count.”*

Transitioning back to school from treatment can bring up many challenges for children and parents. Thankfully, there are ways that the parents, the treatment team, and the school can help make it a smooth transition. Continue reading to find out how you can support your child in this transition.

### **PLAN AHEAD**

- Have a clear plan in place for the transition back to school. Use this plan as an opportunity to anticipate challenges that may arise.
- Consistent communication with your child’s teachers and counsellors can help them stay involved and aware of the transition plan.

### **TAKE SMALL STEPS**

- Start with one or two-hour school days, and eventually work back up to full days at school.
- Lower expectations with respect to grades, and just focus on re-integration into the school environment.





## How can I improve my relationship with my child while fighting the eating disorder?

*“Recovery and time will do that. The relationship will survive and will become like it was before the eating disorder.”*

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*“That first hug from your child during recovery is precious and worth waiting for!”*

A parent’s relationship with their child is complex and unique. There are ups and downs, good days and bad days, and so on. How can you maintain a positive relationship with your child while fighting the eating disorder?

### **LISTEN**

- Give them time, love, and patience, and listen to their real voice, not the eating disorder voice.
- Look for their hidden messages to you, and get to know the “code” they use to communicate.
- Stay calm, be supportive and understanding.
- Use reflective listening, and do your best to understand the eating disorder.

### **BE PATIENT AND LOVING**

- Be patient and try not to expect a relationship when your child is engulfed with an eating disorder.
- Always express love. It’s important that your child knows that you love them - even when they hate what you are doing.
- Tell your child out loud that you love them. Try to show an increase of love after particularly difficult moments.
- Try to have some nice times, not involving food, with your child.



## How can I maintain a positive relationship with my other kids?

*“My partner and I traded off – one parent would take our struggling child to appointments, while the other parent would spend time with the siblings. This helped us connect with them regularly. We also made sure to have individual parent/child time once a month during this time.”*

Through your child’s treatment and recovery, you might be finding your other children are not getting the attention that they would otherwise receive. Having a child with an eating disorder can be very tough on siblings. How can you maintain a positive relationship with your other children while supporting your child’s recovery?

### **MAKE TIME FOR OTHER CHILDREN**

- Try to give them at least a little bit of time with you every day. Make sure you always find time in the day to talk to them.
- Be there for your other kids and help them understand that this one child has an illness and you need to be there more at this time.

### **VALIDATE FEELINGS**

- Have a family meeting where everyone gets to say how they are feeling and what they would like to see change.
- Validate your other children’s talents and good qualities, and reassure them that they too are loved and precious.

# CHAPTER 7

## MESSAGES OF HOPE

Hope is a powerful word. It is the driving force that helps us believe that things will get better; it gives us a purpose, and sometimes it's all that keeps us going. Below are messages of hope to you from other parents who have been on the same journey as you. We hope these messages inspire you to find the strength to keep moving forward.

### What I'm most proud of:



**I am most proud of my child's perseverance in this recovery process, which I can see is heartbreaking. For myself, I am proud I can still see through the fog.**

When you first start the fight, you think it will never end, but it does and it's so worth it. I'm proud I didn't give up.

I'm very proud of the fact that I have had the strength to fight this for so long. It has been a long battle, but one that I know I will win and in the end my child will have a bright future ahead.

I'm proud of the love my family continues to find, and the support we have found for each other.

My child. I am proud my child is so strong and amazing for waking up each morning and fighting this monster.

**I am proud to say we survived. Our child is well, and life is getting better.**

It took me a while to understand the seriousness of the illness, but I am proud that I was able to understand it. I am also proud to have found within myself the calm confidence I needed.





## General Inspirational Messages



The greater your belief that you are stronger, smarter, and have more staying power than the eating disorder, the greater the chance your child will come to believe that too.

**Fear can keep us up all night long, but faith makes one fine pillow.**

- Philip Gulley

**Call it a clan, call it a network, call it a tribe, call it a family. Whatever you call it, whoever you are, you need one.**

- Jane Howard

We had cave-ins, deals, negotiations, fall-offs and other things I am less proud of. Raise your hand for having caved to the eating disorder. Give yourself a do-over, and get back on it.

**It's a journey. There is no beginning or end, just a path.**

**I like to think of it as a struggle that will help my child discover their future. This is making them stronger and more resilient.**

The power of love to change bodies is legendary, built into folklore, common sense, and everyday experience. Love moves the flesh, it pushes matter around. Throughout history, "tender loving care" has uniformly been recognized as a valuable element in healing.

- Larry Dossey

**You may lose a battle, but not the war.**  
**- Anonymous**

I used to email/text my child daily motivational/recovery images and quotes I found on the internet. It allowed me to support my child in an unobtrusive way that honoured how their generation communicates. It worked well.

**One day, one meal, one second at a time.**

Weight restoration is the first step, maintenance the second, unconditional love and patience the third. Recovery is a process that will take longer than you may want, but remember your child will return if you stay the course with strength and humour.

**Once you choose hope, anything's possible.**

**- Christopher Reeve**



# CONCLUSION

The moment that an eating disorder begins to appear seems to be the moment that everything else starts to go. Family, friends, work - they all seem to fall off the priority list and all that matters is your child's health. Because recovering from an eating disorder can be a lengthy path, it's important for parents like yourself to reach out and find someone to support you in this process, whether it be a support group, therapist, or friend. Your own health, mental and physical, is equally as important as your child's. You can only support them when you are your strongest self. We hope that this guide has provided you with new information and strategies that will help both you and your family throughout the journey to recovery. For more information, please see your primary caregiver.

# APPENDIX

## **KELTY MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCE CENTRE**

The Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre offers information and resources on a wide range of mental health and substance use challenges affecting children and youth in British Columbia. These include, but are not limited to; depression, anxiety, attention deficit and behavioural problems, and substance use. We also provide resources and peer support for individuals of any age with an eating disorder or a disordered eating concern.

PHONE 604-875-2084  
TOLL FREE 1-800-665-1822  
EMAIL [keltycentre@cw.bc.ca](mailto:keltycentre@cw.bc.ca)  
WEBSITE [keltymentalhealth.ca](http://keltymentalhealth.ca)

## **FAMILIES EMPOWERED AND SUPPORTING TREATMENT OF EATING DISORDERS**

Families Empowered and Supporting Treatment of Eating Disorders (F.E.A.S.T.) is an international organization of and for caregivers of eating disorder patients. F.E.A.S.T. serves families by providing information and mutual support, promoting evidence-based treatment, and advocating for research and education to reduce the suffering associated with eating disorders.

EMAIL [info@feast-ed.org](mailto:info@feast-ed.org)  
WEBSITE [members.feast-ed.org](http://members.feast-ed.org)

## **MAUDSLEY PARENTS**

Maudsley Parents is an organization made up of parents who have helped their children recover from anorexia and bulimia through the use of Family-Based Treatment, also known as the Maudsley approach, an evidence-based therapy for eating disorders. This website offers hope and help to other families confronting eating disorders. You'll find information on eating disorders and family-based treatment, family stories of recovery, and supportive parent-to-parent advice.

EMAIL [contact@maudslayparents.org](mailto:contact@maudslayparents.org)  
WEBSITE [maudslayparents.org](http://maudslayparents.org)