

# EATING DISORDERS MEAL SUPPORT: HELPFUL APPROACHES FOR FAMILIES

## MEAL SUPPORT AT A GLANCE

Coping with an eating disorder in the family can be overwhelming. **Anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, other specified feeding or eating disorder (OSFED), avoidant restrictive food intake disorder (ARFID) and unspecified feeding or eating disorder** are serious illnesses with potentially life threatening consequences. It's important to remember that eating disorders can affect people of all ages and genders.

Meal times can be extremely difficult for youth and their families. This fact sheet outlines the strategies demonstrated in the video *Eating Disorders Meal Support: Helpful Approaches for Families*. The strategies presented are supported by research and can help meal times go more smoothly, with less anxiety and fewer arguments, and at the same time, help youth to complete their meals.

Throughout all the tools and strategies presented, please remember the **4C's of Meal Support for your child**:

- 1) Remain **Calm**. They will pick up on your anxiety which can make them more anxious.
- 2) Be **Confident**. The more confident you appear the more reassured they will feel.
- 3) Be **Consistent**. Stick with what you've decided and don't negotiate.
- 4) Be **Compassionate**. Understand that they are doing something that is very difficult for them.

### MEAL PLANNING

Planning meals and snacks well ahead of time can help to:

- **Lower anxiety**
- **Minimize negotiation**
- **Ensure adequate nutrition**

Some strategies that families have found helpful include:

- **Planning several days in advance**. This will give you time to work through any disagreements that you and your child might have about the meals.
- **Providing only minimal choices**. A few choices can be helpful in the planning stage, but too many can sometimes be overwhelming for your child.
- **Address who, what, when, and where** in your planning. Be specific about who will be involved, what you are going to eat, what time you will eat, and where the meal will take place.

### MEAL PREPARATION

Youth often want to be involved in meal preparation and serving, but this can be very stressful for them and at the same time disruptive for parents and caregivers. Youth are often worried about the ingredients of the meal and portion sizes. It may be helpful to **set some ground rules** – for example:

- **No negotiations** are allowed in the kitchen.
- **Remove youth from the kitchen** until recovery allows them to be able to participate.
- **Avoid measuring** when cooking and serving.
- **Avoid 'diet' or "low fat" foods**.
- **Parents and caregivers have final word** on portion sizes if they feel that the youth has not served themselves enough.

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### MEAL SUPPORT AT A GLANCE *(continued)*

#### SUPPORTED EATING

Mealtime can be a stressful and confusing time for a youth with an eating disorder. Youth may be struggling with intrusive thoughts and fears about the food they are eating, but there are strategies that families can use to reduce stress and anxiety at the table even when it is very difficult for the youth to eat.

- **Create a positive atmosphere** that focuses on the social aspect of meals.
- **Eat together**
- **Avoid sensitive topics:**
  - **Food**
  - **Weight**
  - **Calories**
  - **Appearance**

**Others...**even topics like school, friends, or hobbies can be stressful for some youth, so be aware of the topics that are sensitive for your child.

- **Use distraction** to draw attention away from the meal. Use strategies that work for your family –tell stories, do crossword puzzles, watch a favorite show – whatever you find helpful.
- **Remember to stay:**
  - **Calm**
  - **Confident**
  - **Consistent**
  - **Compassionate**
- **Use short, supportive phrases** in your own words.
- **Stay focused** on completing the meal.

#### POST MEAL

For some youth the time after a meal can be more stressful than the meal itself. They may feel terribly guilty and may experience physical pain from eating more than they are used to. They may have overwhelming feelings which they may deal with in unhealthy ways. To prevent these types of behaviours use:

- **Supervision**
- **Distraction**
- **Plan structured activities** with your child after meals, such as games, homework or watching a favourite movie.

Helping your child recover from an eating disorder can be a difficult process but the tools and strategies outlined can help meal times go more smoothly, reduce anxiety for everyone involved, and make it easier for youth to get the nutrition that they need. Recovery from an eating disorder can take time, but recovery is possible. Be prepared for setbacks, and seek professional help as needed. Additional resources can be found on the Kelty Eating Disorders website at [keltyeatingdisorders.ca](http://keltyeatingdisorders.ca)

To view the Meal Support video, please visit:  
<https://tinyurl.com/3yudhz4z>

