

Tips for Parents & Families

of folks dealing with eating disorders

- Try to use body neutral language-- not just about your child's body, but about your own and others' bodies. When describing someone, try to steer clear of using bodily descriptors. For example, you could say, "They teach math at the middle school, have rainbow-colored glasses frames, are obsessed with salamanders..."
- Seek guidance! You will likely need to help your child with meal preparation, as well as providing support and accountability. You should consult with your child's dietitian or physician to fully understand your child's meal plan and nutritional needs. You may also need to unlearn some implicit biases and misinformation about nutrition and health. Your child's providers will be able to offer you guidance on these as well.
- When expressing concern about your child's behaviours or body, try to use constructive language. Saying things like "you look sick" or "you don't look like you have an eating disorder" are not helpful and can actually reinforce the eating disorder thought patterns.
- In reference to the above, try to validate your child's experiences and feelings instead. You might say, "I can tell that you are struggling" or "I'm wondering if you might be feeling some tough emotions right now".
- Remind your child that it is okay to feel and express their emotions by using their voice, not their body. This is a big one and starts with parents/guardians setting a good example. If you can't express and process your own emotions effectively, your child is likely going to struggle with that too. Practice holding space for both your child's emotions and your own.
- Seek your own support! Whether that is getting your own therapist or counselor, engaging with a religious leader, finding a support group for families, connecting with your local NAMI chapter, it's important that you get your own support so you can best support your child.
- When in doubt, seek a second opinion. If your child is seeing a physician or other provider who doesn't seem to understand eating disorders or lacks the expertise to effectively treat eating disorders, consider consulting with another provider.
- Try to remember that although your child may do or say things that feel hurtful to you, it's because they are ill. Malnutrition causes cognitive deficits, difficulty with emotional regulation, and seriously impedes the ability to think rationally. It is not your child's fault that they are sick.
- Although things may feel bleak or even hopeless at times, you must remind yourself (and your child) to not give up. People can, and DO, recover from eating disorders.

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