

We hope that this booklet will help you to take good care of yourself and give you hope. In addition, it may give you ideas and information to enable you to support somebody who is struggling with an eating disorder during a celebration

Although the booklet may not be able to answer all of your questions, it includes many strategies that have helped other people. It is not intended to replace seeking professional help, or to put extra pressures on you, but to offer you support

Coping with Celebrations

Advice for carers and families on supporting patients with their eating during celebrations.

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Celebrations

Most of us enjoy having things to celebrate, things such as birthdays, religious festivals, weddings, graduations etc. There are other times that we get together to remember someone, such as funerals or memorials. However happy, sad or emotional the occasion, this can be a particularly challenging time when someone in the family is struggling with an eating disorder.

In order to be able to participate in the celebration, it may be helpful to give some thought beforehand to how you can all manage this time. To get together with your loved one and to think ahead about possible strategies that might support them can be really useful. If this is not possible at the moment, because the eating disorder is very strong, this booklet contains ideas that others have found useful.

Difficulties

Past patients have told us that celebrations can be a particularly stressful time for them – often with an emphasis on family get-togethers, parties and food.

For some celebrations, it may be that family and/or friends meet up to enjoy time together. For the sufferer, this may mean the excitement becomes tinged with fear about being expected to eat with people who don't know about their struggles with food, eating and body-image issues. The distress and anxiety provoked by this can cause tears, panic attacks, angry outbursts or total avoidance, which can in turn lead to arguments and an atmosphere of tension.

For you as supporters, you need to feel that you are clear what you can and cannot manage. Whilst wanting to be there for your loved one, it is also important to look after yourself. The worry about how you and your loved one will cope can prevent enjoyment and leave you feeling on edge.

This questionnaire might be useful as an aid to support a discussion with your loved one about how best to manage their food and eating during a time of celebration.

1. People with eating disorders have reported difficulties when it comes to celebrations. Have you found any of these to be a particularly difficult time?
Yes / No
2. Any specific events that have been hard or that you are worried about?.....
.....
.....
3. What particular things have you found difficult?
(eg. large family meals etc.)
.....
.....
.....
4. What has helped you in the past with these difficulties?
(eg. support from friends; distraction)
.....
.....
.....
5. What ideas do you have about things that could help you with this upcoming celebration
.....
.....
.....
6. When it comes to eating during the celebration, what words are particularly helpful?
.....
.....
.....

After a Meal

- It is normal to want to praise your loved one after they have struggled to get through a meal, although this needs to be done sensitively. Comments like “I can see that was hard for you” or “you’ve got through it” can be really supportive. It might be useful to talk to your loved one about the comments that they find helpful/unhelpful so that you feel confident in what you are saying.
- Many find it helpful to have an activity planned for after the meal, e.g. a board game, jigsaw or film to watch
- It may be that your loved one needs some time by themselves after a meal as it can be overwhelming. Be aware of any challenges this may present and think with them about what can help eg delaying visits to the bathroom, having someone sit quietly with them.
- For people who may struggle with purging or other behaviours post meal, talk to them about what could distract them after eating and agree a plan.

Common Problems:

- People watching every mouthful the sufferer eats, or commenting on the sufferer’s eating habits and behaviours
- Comments about portion sizes or choices of foods,
- Encouragement to eat more, or to eat ‘fear foods’ such as chocolate,
- Having to eat in front of lots of people,
- People being uneasy around the sufferer, and not knowing what to say,
- Arguments about what and how much to eat.
- People commenting on weight, shape or diets, their own and others.
- Although it is common for encouraging friends and relatives to mention how well someone looks, the person may misinterpret this as saying they are fat.
- Many people have said that being rushed during a meal makes them very distressed. Gentle, sensitive reminders about the time can be helpful though. This can help prevent meals from dragging endlessly on.

What may Help?

People who have had an eating disorder have come up with a list of strategies that they found helpful.

It is important to remember though that everyone is different, and what helps one person may be distressing to another. For this reason it may be more helpful to ask the person to decide what helps them, and what doesn’t. At the end of this booklet, after these lists, there are some questions that might be useful for this process.

General Points

- It can help to firmly tell family members and friends who know about the eating disorder not to comment on the person's appearance, or what/how much food is being eaten.
- It can be helpful to give family and friends information to help them understand more about eating disorders. It is often misunderstood and misrepresented in the media, which does not help the sufferer.
- It will be helpful to remember the level of anxiety people with an eating disorder can feel, and to act in a supportive, non-judgemental way.
- The person may find unsolicited questions about their problems difficult to deal with (especially whilst eating). If however they openly discuss a topic associated with their personal struggles, it can be helpful to talk about these.
- It is best to actively avoid talking about dieting, making weight or appearance related comments (about *anyone*).

Before a Meal

- Agree beforehand what is going to be eaten and stick to it. Changes can be very hard to manage.
- If there are going to be lots of challenging foods, eg buffet, consider bringing their own food to reduce stress of having to choose.
- It might be easier to serve the meals away from the table, so the person avoids the stress of wondering if their portion size is OK.
- If everyone else is serving themselves however, it can draw attention, so it may be easier to have a supporter sitting next to the person, so they can copy their portion.
- It may be worth considering eating before or after the meal to reduce stress, particularly in early stages of recovery.

The Environment

- It is best to try and achieve a relaxed, normal environment, which will help the person to remember that mealtimes are a healthy part of everyday life.

During a Meal

- During the meal, it can be really helpful to initiate talk about general topics and light current affairs, because sufferers often like to be distracted from their anxieties. The struggle with the eating disorder can be very preoccupying though, which can make it hard for the person to be actively involved in the conversation.
- For distraction, it can be good to have music playing, or the radio on. This can also relieve tension in the room.
- The person will also find obvious staring difficult to cope with, as this is usually a very distressing time for them.
- Commenting on their meals/foods (especially portion sizes) can make the person feel very self-conscious, which will often make it harder for them to eat in front of others.
- Challenging food behaviours that are inappropriate. Most sufferers agree that confronting this helps in the long run, but can feel very humiliating at the time. It is important that challenges are done sensitively and carefully, so that it doesn't make the person feel guilty, embarrassed or ashamed. The eating disorder feeds on these feelings.
- It can help if you could quietly and sensitively say something like "I can see you're really struggling, is there anything I can do to help you?" or "Would it help to talk about what's troubling you".
- It is also really important to blame the illness, not the person. The eating disorder can make your relative 'not think straight' and behave in ways they wouldn't normally.
- With rituals, it can be helpful for some people to be reassured that they don't have to carry these out.

