

Eating Disorders: Tips for Families

Developed in collaboration with the mental health centers of NBHP and FBHP & the Client and Family Advisory Board

- 1. Be engaged in your child's treatment.** Studies have shown that family therapy and support are extremely beneficial for someone experiencing an eating disorder. If you are concerned about your child's weight loss or eating behavior, bring up concerns with your child's therapist or medical doctor.
- 2. Be open** to looking at your family's eating habits, views of food, and self-image. Developing healthy family eating habits, such as eating together as a family and talking about how proper diet impacts energy level and overall health, can be helpful for children. Having a positive outlook on self-image is important to help children develop healthy self-esteem. Model healthy eating by avoiding extreme dieting behavior. It is very difficult for youth to recover when others around them are reinforcing the message that being thin is important.
- 3. Focus on encouraging healthy behaviors** while avoiding shaming your child about the unhealthy behaviors. Youth can have a hard time admitting that they have an eating disorder or believing that it's a problem that needs to be worked on. Using scare tactics or extreme means might increase the eating disorder behaviors. Avoid power struggles. Avoid getting into arguments about weight or food.
- 4. Educate yourself.** Youth who have eating disorders are not being spiteful or simply acting out. Eating disorders are usually associated with high levels of stress and extreme emotions and there are resources to help you understand and support your child. See Resources below for places to find helpful information.
- 5. Encourage your child to talk with people he/ she trusts.** Some teens feel more comfortable talking with people outside of their immediate family. The important thing is that they are talking to someone they trust who can help them cope.
- 6. Listen to your child.** It might be difficult to listen to what your child has to say and the feelings he or she is experiencing; however, this is a sign that your child wants to involve you in his or her care.
- 7. Take care of yourself.** Do not blame yourself or feel guilty if your child has an eating disorder. Taking care of yourself can help you stay healthy, but can also model healthy living and eating habits for your child. This might include a family support group.
- 8. Encourage activities** that increase your child's self-esteem. Eating disorders can be highly related to perfectionism. Show empathy and support if your child struggles with not meeting his or her high expectations. Encourage self-esteem: respect your teen's accomplishments, look for and remind your teen about positive qualities and remind him or her that your love is unconditional.
- 9. Spend time together** and enjoy each other's company by finding activities that don't involve food.
- 10. Be aware and talk with your child** about how the media and other social influences impact self-esteem and body image. Encourage your teen to question the messages that she or he sees and hears.

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Resources for Families

“Life without ED” Jenni Schaefer, 2003

National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) 800-931-2237 <http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/>

The Eating Disorder Foundation, Colorado
<http://www.eatingdisorderfoundation.org/index.htm>

National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders
<http://www.anad.org/>

The Mayo Clinic-Tips to protect your teens
<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/teen-eating-disorders/my01156>

Cooper, P.J. (1995) Bulimia Nervosa: A Guide to Recovery. London: Robinson.

Fairburn, C. (1995). Overcoming Binge Eating. New York: Guilford Press

Treasure, J. (1997) Anorexia Nervosa: A Survival Guide for Families, Friends, and Sufferers. Hove, UK: Psychology Press.