



## **WHAT TO DO IF SOMEONE YOU CARE ABOUT HAS AN EATING DISORDER**

Probably the two most frequently asked questions by family members of eating disorder sufferers are:

1) What caused the eating disorder?; and 2) What should we do?

The causation of the eating disorder is complex. It is believed that a number of factors contribute to an individual developing an eating disorder--that is, biological, psychological, societal, and familial elements are all thought to be involved. It is clear that no one person and no one event can cause an eating disorder. Therefore, it is important for family members not to feel responsible and "guilty." Feeling "guilty" can only hinder the healing process in the family.

### **DO'S**

- ☼ realize there is no quick and easy solution. In the treatment of eating disorders, there is "recovery", not "cure". Be aware of the long-term nature of the illness. Anorexics do get better; many completely recover, very few die. But families must face months and sometimes years of treatment and anxiety.
- ☼ attend support groups and counseling. You need support too, and these groups are there for you.
- ☼ encourage the person to get a professional assessment from practitioners experienced in eating disorders.
- ☼ express honest love. Affirm the person for who he/she is rather than for his/her accomplishments, performance, or looks. Do value the person with the disorder, so that he/she can learn to value him or herself.
- ☼ realize the person is ambivalent about getting well and takes comfort in the control and rituals of the disorder.
- ☼ try to do social activities which do not involve food.
- ☼ let the person know their qualities/characteristics you appreciate about him/her.
- ☼ inform yourself about the disorders and their treatment. Read the literature and consult with professionals.
- ☼ encourage decision-making and being responsible for those decisions. Encourage initiative, independence, and autonomy. Be aware though, that anorexics tend to be perfectionists, so that they are never satisfied with themselves. Trust them to find their own values, ideals, and standards rather than insisting on yours.
- ☼ hold the person with the eating disorder accountable for his/her behavior. If his/her eating is draining the family budget, request he/she contribute funds to the monthly grocery bill.
- ☼ allow the person to be in charge of his/her routine of daily life but not yours.
- ☼ realize that by giving up control you are setting the stage for your loved one to develop healthy self-control.
- ☼ recognize that your loved one's behavior is likely to cause you to feel helpless and angry. Recognize and accept these feelings. However, rather than expressing them to your loved one, use your own support group or counseling to help with these feelings.
- ☼ express your caring and interest in seeing the person get well.
- ☼ seek life-saving treatment for anyone who is in jeopardy of endangering self or others
- ☼ accept yourself.
- ☼ express your feelings honestly; he/she probably knows how you are feeling anyway.
- ☼ recognize that "relapse" is part of the recovery process.

## DON'TS

- ✿ give up. People with eating disorders can get better, but families must often deal with months and years of treatment and anxiety. Remember, you will need support and help in dealing with this process.
- ✿ make comments about your loved one's food intake, eating habits, or weight. Your involvement with their eating is a tool to manipulate you. You need to take this tool away from them.
- ✿ ignore the problem, hoping it will go away; it won't.
- ✿ panic. Look around and ask for the help you need.
- ✿ assume because he/she is walking around and not bedridden with his/her disorder, he/she isn't really ill and in pain.
- ✿ tell him/her to "just eat."
- ✿ make your love a condition of the individual's appearance, health, weight, achievement, or any other attribute. Don't comment positively, or negatively, on appearance or weight.
- ✿ feel you must walk on "eggshells" so the person with the eating disorder won't be upset.
- ✿ let these peculiarities dominate the household.
- ✿ let the person control the family through his/her eating disorder.
- ✿ neglect yourself or other family members by overly focusing on the "sick" person. It is important that he/she see by your attitude and actions that he/she is important to you, but no more important than every other member of the family.
- ✿ be manipulated. Require the person to be responsible for his/her behavior. Setting appropriate limits with your loved one offers good role modeling for him/her to learn to set limits as well.
- ✿ force or encourage the person to eat, or eat properly.
- ✿ try to stop the person with bulimia from eating during a binge.
- ✿ try to control the person's behavior. It can intensify the problem.
- ✿ force him/her to receive treatment unless his/her health is clearly in danger.
- ✿ get hooked into power struggles. Only impose rules which are necessary for the person's or the family's safety and well-being.
- ✿ think about what he/she could have done differently.
- ✿ feel guilty or dwell on causes. Most parents ask: "What have I done wrong?" There are no perfect parents. You have done the best you could. Once you have checked out his/her physical condition with a physician and made it possible for him/her to begin counseling, getting well is his/her responsibility. It is his/her problem, not yours.
- ✿ tell the anorexic who has gained weight he/she looks better.
- ✿ expect yourself to be a perfect person, family member, or friend.
- ✿ expect (or hope for) the person to be perfect.
- ✿ assume the eating disorder patient is "all better" after being in the hospital. Often, numerous hospitalizations are required.
- ✿ blame yourself.
- ✿ be afraid to have the child separated from you, (either at school or in separate housing), if it becomes obvious that his/her continued presence is undermining the emotional health of the family. The final separation is death; don't allow him/her to intimidate the family with threats of suicide.
- ✿ put down the child by comparing him/her to their more "successful siblings or friends." His/her self esteem is a reflection of you esteem for him/her. Do not ask questions such as, "How are you feeling?" or "How is your social life?" He/she already feels inadequate and questions only aggravate the feeling.

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