

## SUPPORTING VS. ENABLING: DO'S AND DON'TS FOR FAMILIES AND SUPPORTERS OF PEOPLE IN EATING DISORDER RECOVERY



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Supporting a person with an eating disorder can be a very tricky thing to do. How do you know whether what you are doing is supporting your loved one in their recovery process, or enabling their eating disorder to retain its grip? Below are some helpful guidelines, as told to me by families, clients and staff engaged in the process of recovery.

**Do:** Educate yourself about eating disorders. The more you know about what your friend or loved one is going through, the better you can support them. Don't be afraid to ask them questions also, as every person is unique. Eating disorders are serious illnesses,

with the highest mortality rate of any mental illness. If you know or suspect you have a loved one suffering from an eating disorder, it is important to support them to get effective treatment.

The following web sites are a good place to start educating yourself:

- <http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/resource-links>
- <http://www.aedweb.org>
- <http://www.something-fishy.org>
- <http://www.anad.org/get-help/>
- <http://bedaonline.com>
- <http://www.montenido.com/about-us/eating-disorder-education-resources/>

**Don't:** Talk about or evaluate your body or other people's bodies, or talk about dieting or weight in front of the person in recovery. Even if you are not commenting on their body or their diet, you send an important message about what you value or judge in a person by how you discuss yourself or others. Of course, many people are unhappy with their weight or appearance and the prevalence of the diet industry in our culture cannot be understated. Just because you may be on a special diet does not mean you yourself are engaging in disordered eating habits. However, a person in eating disorder recovery is especially vulnerable to these messages. What is a casual comment to you, can for them be a verbal sledgehammer. This goes for compliments as well as criticisms! For example, noting that a celebrity looks great because he/she has lost weight can send a message that what you value about that person is their appearance. These messages are subtle but insidious, and it takes practice to become aware of them.

**Do:** Ask to be involved in your loved one's treatment. One of the most important components of eating disorder recovery is developing a support network of people who understand what you are working on and how they can help. This is what we often call "putting the eating disorder out of a job." For many people with eating disorders, the ED is a way to cope with difficult emotions, thoughts or events. Using food or disordered behaviors to exercise control over one's situation is a strategy that may seem helpful to a client



until it becomes a real problem. In order to move away from the disorder, the person must begin to trust and rely on friends and family to gain the emotional support that all people need.

Another reason offering your support and involvement can be so powerful is because of the shame and stigma so often associated with eating disorders. Joining with your loved one and engaging in therapy to the degree they are comfortable sends a message of empathy, acceptance and love that they may not believe possible. The alleviation of shame can be incredibly impactful on the recovery process for a person with an eating disorder. This is something supporters can offer in a way that the person in recovery often values more than if it comes from a treatment professional. The validation you can offer with your kindness and acceptance is incredibly healing and important.

**Don't:** Make changes in your own life to accommodate the eating disorder. A person in recovery from an eating disorder may experience a daily battle between these two selves, and it can become quite confusing for them and for their loved ones. For example, a client of mine once told me how supportive her family was – they would stay home and watch tv with her rather than going out to eat at a restaurant. Restaurants made her (Eating Disordered Self) uncomfortable. Rather than making the client choose between what her Healthy Self wanted – time with her family – and what her Eating Disordered Self wanted – to restrict calories – the family's "supportive" gesture appeased the ED. This enabled her to keep using disordered behaviors with no negative consequences. This client highly valued and loved her family and spending time with them. Before coming to treatment, the client felt her ED was "functional," despite how miserable she often felt, because she was still able to "have her cake and eat it too." Creating a choice between staying alone with her ED and engaging socially with her family was exactly what was needed to increase her motivation to recover.

Another reason not to accommodate the eating disorder is because it is awfully tiring! Supporters who go out of their way to appease the disorder can find themselves feeling "burnt out" and even resentful of their loved one. In addition to seeking your own support (see below), it is crucial to know what your limits are and to stick to them. Explain your personal boundaries to your loved one in recovery during a normal conversation (not an argument) and ask for their understanding and cooperation. This is another way to keep yourself healthy and take care of your own needs, so that you can be supportive to them as well.

**Do:** Get your own support. This can be from many sources, such as a support group, a therapist, friend or clergy. Some treatment facilities offer support groups just for loved ones of their clients for this reason. It is important to recognize that getting your own support can help the person you love who is suffering from an eating disorder. Much like the way that, on an airplane, you're instructed to put your own air mask on before helping others, you must take care of yourself in order to be supportive to your loved one as they recover.

**Don't:** give up hope. Real, sustained and permanent recovery from an eating disorder is possible. The road to being fully recovered is not easy, but the presence of loving supporters is essential to progress on that journey. Thank you for taking the time to read this article and for educating yourself so that you can be an effective supporter to your loved one.

