

CULTIVATING RECOVERY AROUND THE KITCHEN



Mary Dye, MPH, RD, CEDRD, LD/N and Lissa Garcia, RD, LD/N come together to share an important series for cultivating recovery around the kitchen. Mary and Lissa will discuss ways to ensure that the family is providing a safe space around mealtime for eating disorder recovery.

As families well know, kitchens and dining areas can become a battle zone when an eating disorder is present. Since they are so

often such places of conflict, we need to prep them for the fragile early stage of returning home from treatment, when things as simple as the color of the placemats, type of milk and shape of the bowls can serve to increase urges to engage in maladaptive patterns or reinforce recovery oriented behaviors.

When I start this discussion with clients I ask them to describe their kitchen and dining area and we talk about how certain parts may trigger old ways of thinking or serve as an opportunity to facilitate new recovery oriented behaviors. Often this leads to exploring the size of their dishes, view from their designated spot at the table or when we need to, we get creative at thinking of how to create a table in small spaces where this is none. From all these discussions, I've compiled a list of things to consider as you prepare to go home or to welcome your loved one home.

Now, don't think that keeping old placemats is going to risk a loved one's recovery; it certainly is not. But it is an opportunity to discuss with your loved one the environment that they'll be returning to and what small changes might help them to reduce the pull toward old ways of thinking in regard to food. There are some common themes that tend to come up and are worth addressing before discharging from treatment. Keep in mind, this is certainly not to suggest a costly kitchen overhaul. As fun as it may be for some to re-decorate, things as simple as changing a few items or swapping a tablecloth can make a world of difference.

Ensure that dishes can accommodate recovery-oriented portions

A common situation clients find themselves in is comparing the portions they ate in their eating disorder to those their body needs for a life in recovery. For instance, if a person's body needs three times the serving of cereal that they had been allowing themselves previously, that portion difference the familiar bowl is going to look pretty different. This difference can spark negative thoughts and comparisons, fueling restrictive urges. Replacing the bowl with a new size or shaped version that can better accommodate the portions or just simply serves as a new visual point of reference can help to reduce this internal critique and comparison, leaving them with more energy to eat (and hopefully enjoy) the cereal rather than question it.

Ensure that furniture can accommodate all bodies at the table

Sitting through meals can be hard enough in a comfortable seat, so just think of how challenging it is in an uncomfortable one. Questions to consider are: can the chairs comfortably accommodate the weight, stature and space needed for all who may dine here? Is the seat too hard or soft, wide or narrow and what body image thoughts and judgments might this be fueling in myself or my loved one? For some in treatment,



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there are changes to the body and for some there are not. Take the time to consider if furniture has been used in “body checking” and take steps to remove the baseline measure and promote a comfortable and if needed, new, experience at the table.

Sensory overhaul

For some, the small change of accent colors such as pot holders and dish towels can make the space feel new and less familiar – this a good thing when you consider how pre-treatment the eating disorder felt at home. Burning a new candle scent, re-doing shelf paper, replacing drawer liners and re-arranging the cabinets are few simple ways to give a new sensory experience that demands observation and promotes awareness, helping us to develop new patterns and create fresh memories.

Reclaim the table as a place for peace

Promote calm at the table as much as possible. Some clients learn that busy patterns and bold colors put them on edge while others thrive on such aesthetic. Some find soft music helps them focus. Help to create a space that lessens tension and promotes a mindful experience. This could mean removing clutter, using a favorite color or making a little place card that serves as a reminder of short term and long-term recovery goals. It may mean investing in a flower arrangement or putting out placemats made by a cherished family member as an act of grounding and connection.

Change the view

When I ask clients about eating at home many can describe in great detail the view from “their seat”. Think of that seat and the view from it as the one the eating disorder grew accustomed to and sit somewhere different. Perhaps looking out a window as opposed to a mirror is less activating if body image is a struggle. Perhaps facing a different piece of artwork would serve as a welcome distraction when needed instead of looking to the one that is known so well. Perhaps sitting next to the family member who is of strongest support and farther from plate view of any who might spark comparison thoughts or judgments. This is often the toughest request of clients, as it means asking for others to change their positions, but it can make a significant difference at meal times.

Stock recovery-oriented food

Create a space for your loved one in recovery, not for their eating disorder. So often, well-meaning family members stock the kitchen with foods they saw their loved one consume prior to leaving for treatment, thinking that it must be a favorite item. While this is well intentioned it can risk the loss of momentum built in treatment of broadening the diet and gaining insight into intentions behind food choices. In treatment, we do a lot of work to explore and weed out preferences of the eating disorder from those of the client’s authentic self. A common conclusion many reach is that their eating disorder led them to believe they liked or disliked various things when their authentic self actually craves satiety, full nourishment and variety. Access to foods chosen by the eating disorder can lead to clients questioning their newfound food freedom and flexibility; increasing urges to fall back into old patterns.

Remove items with overt diet messages. Honor new foods enjoyed by your loved one and try to avoid comparative talk such as “I’ve never known you to like meat”. Keep in mind your loved one has an identity completely separate from their past or present food choices. Talk with your loved one and their dietitian to gain an understanding of what foods belong in the recovery oriented kitchen and what foods need to stay out, at least in the early days back home.

Break the rules

Not the food safety ones: those are very important. But do break the eating disorder's rules. Have fun with food. Try breakfast for dinner. Pack a picnic in the yard with finger foods. Eat cake for breakfast. Charge head on at whatever food rules allowed the disorder to thrive. What was once a battleground can become a place of experimentation, joy, corrective memories and connection. Dance in the kitchen. Make a mess. Laugh and turn up the music. There is nothing the eating disorder hates more than the reclaiming of its territory. Take it back in supporting your loved one in the breaking of rules to protect that precious process of recovery.