



National  
Eating Disorders  
Collaboration

# Caring for Someone with an Eating Disorder



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**Caring for  
Someone  
with an  
Eating Disorder**

**A resource for families, friends  
and carers developed by the  
National Eating Disorders Collaboration**



# CARING FOR SOMEONE WITH AN EATING DISORDER

Family, carers and support services play a crucial role in the care, support and recovery of people with an eating disorder. These people can contribute to an effective collaborative care approach in three key areas.

**Supporting engagement with treatment:** A characteristic of eating disorders is that the person will be reluctant to seek help, often denying illness or concealing behaviours (Tury, et al., 2010; Vandereycken & Van Humbeeck, 2008). People in close relationships to the person with an eating disorder play a vital role in influencing help seeking, raising awareness of problem behaviours, and supporting recognition of stages in recovery.

**Supporting implementation of treatment:** The family or support network are integral members of the treatment team. To support complex multi disciplinary treatment in the context of a dynamic illness that manifests in different ways at different points in the course of illness, carers require knowledge and skills.

**Providing long term care and support:** Long term treatment requires an equally long term commitment from the person's support network with implications for the family or carer's economic, social, physical and mental wellbeing.

## The effects of an eating disorder are often felt not only by the person experiencing it, but also by their family and support network.

A carer can be any person involved in caring for someone with an eating disorder. If you are caring for someone with an eating disorder it is possible that at some time or another you will feel:

- Distressed about what is happening to you, the person you care for, or your family.
- Burnt out from the demands of caring for someone with an eating disorder on top of family life and work commitments.
- Guilty about your “role” in the illness. You may fear that you are in some way responsible.
- Confused about the best way to help, both daily and in the long term goal of recovery.
- Anxious and afraid about the physical and psychological changes in the person you care for.
- Hopeless about your ability to provide support.

All of these feelings are normal. Caring for someone with an eating disorder is a huge responsibility and comes with considerable personal strain. You may want to “fix” the problem and feel frustrated when you can’t. You may start to fear and dread meal times. You may feel like the eating disorder has taken over your life, leaving no time for the things you used to enjoy as an individual. These are all valid and normal feelings experienced by carers.

## Understanding the stages of change

There are five stages of change that a person with an eating disorder may go through. Everyone is different, and some people may pass backwards and forwards between these stages. Throughout each stage there may be behavioural signs which will help you identify what stage the person is in and how you can best approach them.

### 1. Pre Contemplation

In the pre-contemplation stage a person with an eating disorder will most likely be in denial that there is a problem. You may have noticed some of the warning signs and feel concerned about the person, but they will have little or no awareness of the problems associated with their disordered eating. Instead, they may be focused on controlling their eating patterns. A person with an eating disorder in this stage may not be willing to change or disclose their behaviour and may be hostile, angry or frustrated when approached. This is because the person's eating disorder is currently serving as a way to control or avoid strong and unpleasant emotions. The person may feel unwilling or afraid to let go of these behaviours.

*What you can do:*

- Stay calm and try to see things from their point of view using active listening techniques.
- Show compassion and understanding.
- Take the focus off their disordered eating. Talk about their interests, goals in life and the things they may be missing out on as a result of the eating disorder.
- Don't give up on the person you are supporting, perseverance pays off in many cases in getting someone into treatment.
- Become familiar with our tips for talking to someone you are concerned about, which you can find at <http://www.nedc.com.au/what-to-say-and-do>
- Encourage or support access to medical treatment if their health is compromised, especially in children and adolescents.

### 2. Contemplation

A person with an eating disorder in the contemplation stage will have an awareness of their problems and may be considering the benefits of changing some of their behaviours. They swing between wanting to change and wanting to maintain their disordered eating habits. This can be difficult and confusing for you and the person you are caring for.

*What you can do:*

- Listen to what the person has to say. Demonstrate that you are listening to what they are saying, and you understand their struggle. You can even say it back to them e.g. "I hear you saying that part of you feels like you want to change, while another part of you feels scared of changing..."

- Show them you respect their ideas, particularly the ones in favour of change.
- Highlight the discrepancies in their thinking/actions and amplify the positives for change.
- Try to boost their self esteem and confidence. This will help them believe they can change.

### 3. Preparation/Determination

In this stage the person with the eating disorder has decided they want to change their behaviour and is preparing to make these changes.

*What you can do:*

- Be informed. Learn as much as you can about the steps you and the person you are caring for need to take in order to recover.
- Work with the person to identify their goals and develop a detailed approach of how you will manage the changes together. This may involve developing a treatment plan including wellness and crisis support plans.

### 4. Action

A person with an eating disorder in the action stage has decided they want to change and will need support to help them take the first steps towards recovery. The person can move backwards and forwards in their development during this stage and relapse can be common.

*What you can do:*

- Acknowledge how difficult it is to change and recover from an eating disorder.
- Support the person through challenges and let them know you believe in them. This will help build their confidence.
- Review and refine goals and treatment plans as progress is made.

### 5. Maintenance

In the maintenance stage a person with an eating disorder will have changed their behaviour and may be focusing on maintaining their new, healthier habits while learning to live without an eating disorder. This takes time and requires commitment. It is still possible for a person with an eating disorder to relapse at this stage.

*What you can do:*

- Work together with the person to identify triggers that may impact their recovery.
- Accept relapse as a part of learning and the process of recovery.
- Put systems and strategies in place to help avoid relapse.
- Show care, patience and compassion.

# Eating Disorders: Seven tips for Families and Carers

## 1. Learn as much as you can

The more you can learn about eating disorders and how to treat them the better you will be able to understand what is happening to the person you are caring for.

## 2. Remember who the person is

The person you care for is not their illness even though it may affect their sense of identity. Help them to realise there is more to them than their eating disorder.

## 3. Communicate openly

Communicate regularly with the person you are caring for and avoid showing judgment and negativity. Encourage them to express how they are feeling.

## 4. Stay positive

Draw attention to the positive attributes of the person you are looking after. Talk about things they enjoy and are good at and talk about and plan for the future.

## 5. Make time for yourself

Caring for a person with an eating disorder is hard. Prioritise regular time for yourself to restore your energy and help you become better equipped to be there for the person you care for.

## 6. Be patient

Recovery takes time, patience and perseverance. Remember there is no 'quick fix' for an eating disorder.

## 7. Seek support

Seeking professional support can reduce the amount of stress you carry and improve your capacity to care for someone with an eating disorder. You don't need to do it alone.

Snapshot



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## Helpful tips for carers

Recovering from an eating disorder can be a very slow process and can sometimes take many years. Each stage will bring its own triumphs and challenges to both the person with the eating disorder and to those caring for them. Here are some tips to help you along the way.

**1. Learn as much as you can:** Having a good understanding of eating disorders will help you to identify what is happening to the person you are caring for. There is information available to provide you with skills and coping mechanisms to help you throughout this difficult time. You can find a useful overview of eating disorders in our [Eating Disorders in Australia](#) booklet. To find helpful resources visit the NEDC Knowledge Hub at [www.nedc.com.au/research-resources](http://www.nedc.com.au/research-resources)

**2. Remember who the person is:** Do not let the eating disorder take over the person's identity. Remember that they are still the same person they have always been. Separating the person from the illness can be helpful for you and the person you are caring for. This is called externalisation and helps all involved to see the illness as the problem and the person you are caring for as part of the solution. This can be very empowering for everyone involved, as the target of all treatment is the problem not the person.

**3. Communicate openly:** Communicate openly, without judgement or negativity and allow the person to express how they are feeling. Avoid focussing on food and weight and instead try to talk about the feelings that may exist beneath the illness. Pay attention to the person's non verbal reactions and body language and encourage them to trust and speak openly with you.

**4. Stay positive:** Draw attention to the positive attributes the person has. Talk about the things they enjoy and are good at and the things you love about them. Reminding the person of their life outside of their illness can help them to realise there is more to them than their eating disorder.

**5. Make time for yourself:** Prioritising “time out” for yourself will help restore your energy and rejuvenate your mind. Make the time to see a friend, go for a walk, do some exercise or see a film. The better you care for yourself, the more you will be able to help the person you are caring for.

**6. Be patient:** People with eating disorders can experience a range of different and conflicting emotions all in one day. This can be very hard for you and the person you are caring for to manage. The road to recovery is littered with emotions and setbacks and can be a long journey. It is important to be as calm and patient as possible throughout their recovery and remember that there is no quick fix. Recovery takes time and patience.

**7. Seek support:** Seeking professional support can reduce the amount of stress you carry and improve your capacity to care for someone with an eating disorder. Community based organisations and respite centres are equipped with specifically trained professionals who can assist you with skills based support, support for your physical and psychological well being, help with employment and also provide information booklets, brochures, peer support groups and networks.

## Get help and support

Many organisations provide further advice and resources for carers of people with eating disorder. For a searchable directory of eating disorder support organisations in Australia go to [www.nedc.com.au/support-organisations](http://www.nedc.com.au/support-organisations)

If you suspect someone you know has an eating disorder, it is important to seek help immediately. The earlier someone seeks help the closer they are to recovery. While your GP may not be formally trained in detecting the presence of an eating disorder, he/she is a good 'first base.' A GP can refer you on to a practitioner with specialised knowledge in eating disorders.

To find help in your local area go to: [www.nedc.com.au/helplines](http://www.nedc.com.au/helplines)



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For a downloadable copy of this resource visit:  
<http://www.nedc.com.au/families-and-carers>

The National Eating Disorders Collaboration  
(NEDC) is an initiative of the Australian Government  
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