



Someone I Love Has an Eating Disorder: Now What?

5 Practical Steps for Getting Connected to the Right Support- for Them *AND* for You

Getting hit with the reality that someone you love is showing major red flags for an eating disorder can be scary, confusing, and overwhelming. It's normal to have no idea what to say, how to support them, or what next steps to take.

This guide is here to offer you a starting point. These 5 practical steps will help you understand what's going on, get the right support in place, and show up in ways that are helpful—for your loved one and for you.

1 Don't Panic– But Do Take it Seriously

Chances are good there's a big part of you freaking out. That's a totally valid response. This part may be causing you to panic, or conversely trying to downplay the alarming behaviors you're observing. Whatever the case may be, take a deep breath (or 3), and know that while it is appropriate to be concerned, early action can make a big difference.

2 Connect with Professional Help

Eating disorders are unique in that they are both psychological and medical illnesses. Because of that, they are best treated with a tri-fold treatment team:

- ☐ **Primary Care Doctor-** Will assess and monitor medical stability. It is important they are specifically familiar with assessing and treating eating disorders, so don't be afraid to ask about this. In some cases, a referral to a specialist can be obtained.
- ☐ **Eating Disorder Therapist-** There to address the emotional and psychological components of the behaviors, and help cultivate more adaptive coping skills. I strongly recommend working with a specialist
- ☐ **Eating Disorder Informed Dietitian-** Offer individualized nutrition support to normalize eating patterns, ensure adequate food intake, and address unhelpful beliefs contributing to a poor relationship with food. In your search for an RD, it can be helpful to look for key-words like “anti-diet”, “HAES-aligned” and “intuitive eating” in their “services” or “about” section.

- ☐ **Bonus Provider: Psychiatrist-** In some cases, medication can be a useful tool in eating disorder treatment.

Need ideas for where to find help? Try:

- ☐ PsychologyToday.com
☐ IADEP (International Association of Disordered Eating Professionals)

3 Understand the Levels of Care

The severity of the eating disorder will determine what level of care is most appropriate for you or your loved one. This will be assessed and discussed with you/your loved one by their ED-informed providers.

Level of Care	What it Looks Like
Outpatient	Talk therapy, nutrition counseling, and medical check-ups at a frequency determined in collaboration with your treatment team.
Intensive Outpatient (IOP)	3-5 days per week of structured care, typically 3 hours per day. Consists of individual therapy and/or group therapy, meal support, and nutrition counseling. May include meetings with MD or psychiatrist, and family therapy.
Partial Hospitalization (PHP)	Full-day treatment.
Residential (RTC)/ Inpatient	24/7 care, live at the treatment facility for a time

4 Understand Your Role

Two things are true - it's not your job to "fix" your loved ones' eating disorder *AND* your presence still very much matters. How you show up for your loved one is also important.

Things to consider:

Express concern with curiosity vs. judgement - ask open questions and use “I-statements”, make curious observations.

Validate their feelings and experiences- it’s important to note that validation does not equate to agreement. So, while you might not agree that they are “only lovable if they lose weight”, you can still acknowledge how hard it would be to feel that way.

Avoid comments about weight, food, and appearance- even the most well intended comments can backfire.

Practice patience- recognize that healing isn’t linear.

Family therapy (especially for teens) and support groups for loved ones (like A.N.A.D)

5 Don’t Neglect Yourself

Recovery is a marathon, not a sprint, and caregiver burnout is a real thing. Having your own support is incredibly important for you, and empowers you to be a steadier anchor for your loved one.

- Look into your own therapy and/or support group
- Have boundaries (and stick to them)
- Know that there is no “perfect” way to do this
- Protect time for things that soothe your nervous system and alleviate stress (aka practice good self care)



You’re Doing a Brave Thing. Keep Going.

Looking at the whole picture of recovery can feel overwhelming. Try instead to focus on tackling *the next best step*. Even reading through this guide is an act of courage and care.



Resource Recap

PsychologyToday.com

IADEP Provider Directory - iadepfoundation.com

FEAST - feast-ed.org

A.N.A.D - **ANAD.org**

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