

If your loved one has an eating disorder you may be part of their support system, Having a support system can be extremely impactful to recovery. Treatment is only one part of recovery, but most people spend more time with their support system than with their clinicians who are providing care. There are many different ways to show your loved one support on their journey through eating disorder recovery. Whether it be lending a listening ear, going grocery shopping, and even recognizing red flags that others may miss.

Eating disorders are complex, and every one presents differently. There is a learning curve when it comes to what to say and do. Please remember that this may be new to you and if you make mistakes it is okay. Know that things that may seem easy or no big deal to you can be extremely upsetting to someone with an eating disorder. Comments like "just eat " minimize the person's feelings are invalidating. Instead, it can be helpful to focus on emotions rather than actions and behaviors. For example, instead of saying "just eat", you could say "what feelings are coming up for you right now. Is there anything I can do to help?". Communication is the best way to prevent causing harm and shows you care.

Here are some ways you can support your loved one with an eating disorder:

## **1. Do not talk about weight or bodies**

Whether it's someone else's weight, your own weight, or someone else completely, leave this topic out of the conversation. Even if the comment may be intended to be positive, it can still be harmful because it can either validate an eating disorder or make someone feel bad about the progress they made in recovery so far.

This is a good rule of thumb to follow in general when talking to anyone (including yourself). Our culture puts an incredible amount of value on physical appearances and body type, which can minimize the other amazing qualities we each have as individuals. Avoiding discussing weight and bodies is a great way to combat diet culture and help support a healthier society.

## 2. Do not talk about eating habits

Again, it doesn't matter whose eating habits are being commented on, don't mention it. For someone with an eating disorder, eating in front of others can be a challenge. Commenting on eating habits can increase their self-consciousness and cause them to fall back into behaviors.

## 3. Minimize food talk

Although some food talk is normal, for example, discussing what you think of a meal or if you enjoy the flavors, food talk to someone with an eating disorder can be triggering. It is already most likely difficult for them to sit down and eat a meal and food talk is just calling more attention to a situation they are already uncomfortable being in. Instead, talk about other topics such as shows you're watching, plans you've made, work or school. One thing that can be extremely helpful for both you and your loved one is to ask them to make a list of topics that they would like to discuss and a list of topics to avoid. This way you can be aware if something is triggering without them having to tell you verbally, which can be difficult.

## 4. Ask them what you can do to help

Everyone has different needs and different ideas of what they find helpful. The only way you can know the best way to provide support is by asking. Some good questions to ask are:

- What should I say when you succeed?

Some people like to have their success acknowledged with words of affirmation. Other people may like a sticker chart or a reward system. Some people do not want their successes acknowledged so outwardly and may prefer you say nothing at all.

- What should I say when you reach a roadblock?

Unfortunately, not every challenge will be successfully executed. Sometimes we encounter roadblocks and have to dust ourselves off and try again. Offering your support when a loved one encounters roadblocks might be when they need you most. This form of support may look like words of affirmation and reassurance. Some people might just want someone to listen, or even just sit with.

- What are some warning signs you might need more support?

Recognizing red flags can be key to stopping someone from backsliding in recovery. Ask your loved one what are some signs they may be relapsing. Is it that they are eating alone more often? Exercising more? Avoiding certain foods? By asking your loved one you can be on the lookout and hopefully take action before it gets worse.

If you have a loved one who is struggling with an eating disorder or disordered thoughts and is not yet in treatment, please get them help. There is no such thing as not being “sick enough”. Eating disorders are treated with a combination of therapy, nutrition education, and medical care. Reach out to [info@mindbodycoopchicago.com](mailto:info@mindbodycoopchicago.com) and learn more about our dietitian Grace, who wrote this blog!