

## Mealtimes

Mealtimes can be the most difficult time of day for someone suffering from an eating disorder. At these times they can become very anxious and can feel guilty for eating; unsurprisingly, extreme outbursts of emotion – especially aggression – may result.

It is best to enlist professional help to enable you to develop a strategy for mealtimes. This will enable you to implement some much needed control at these times, ensuring that steps are taken to encourage your partner to eat and anticipate and alleviate potential triggers without inadvertently encouraging their eating disordered behaviours.

When you are caring for someone with an eating disorder, the aim at mealtimes is to normalise eating: to diminish the threat and dread that they associate with meals and the environments in which they take place, and to gradually get them to eat until they revert to appropriately sized, day-to-day meals at regular intervals. Re-introducing structured eating – planned meals at planned times – is crucial.

From our experience and consultation with professionals, we have put together the following list of the most useful suggestions for people who are supporting someone with an eating disorder before, during, and after mealtimes. Bear in mind that, as each case is unique, not all suggestions will work for everyone, and this list is in no way a substitute for professional help and guidance.

### Before the meal

■ Planning ahead can avert disaster. Consider making a meal-time agreement with your partner – involving family members or others who will be present – to decide:

- the time you will eat together – serving any later could prevent them eating
- who will be present
- the meal to be served and agreed portion sizes for your partner.

-Always check you have the necessary food items for the planned meal, deviation from the agreed meal plan could cause them to panic and limit their food intake

■ Don't let the person you care for do the grocery shopping on their own or cook for you and others alone. By doing the grocery shopping together, you may be able to introduce new foods onto their "safe" foods list, perhaps setting a goal of one each week. You can also encourage this by cooking with them and trying new recipes together

### At the table

■ Aim to maintain neutral conversations, avoiding discussion of food, weight or appearance. Perhaps talk about what you have done during the day, or a specific television programme. The conversation may feel strained at times, but the focus will not be on the person with an eating disorder, and the eating disorder will not dominate

- Ensure that you and anyone else present do not focus on the person with an eating disorder unnecessarily. As far as possible, try to act as you would normally
- No matter how trying mealtimes may be, or how concerned you may be about your partner, try to smile and appear positive and warmly supportive – worried looks from other people at the table can incite and increase their negative feelings
- Having the television or radio on can provide a welcome distraction for your partner, diminishing their feelings of expectation and tremendous pressure to eat
- Make sure that everyone else at the table eats balanced, age-appropriate meals. Adopt a healthy approach to eating: a range of foods and sensible portion sizes. Don't shy away from fatty or unhealthy food, but don't make the mistake of over-indulging in an effort to encourage your partner to eat.

#### Encouraging them to eat

- Start slowly: in the beginning, be wary of pressurising your partner to eat more than they are used to – it may take time for their stomach to re-adjust
- It may be necessary to encourage them to eat, especially if they have not started their meal after some time at the table. Be firm but nurturing – say something along the lines of, 'I know this is really difficult for you, but you need to make a start on your meal now'
- Offer further prompts if they are having difficulty continuing – it is not unheard of for a sufferer to take hours to finish a meal, so your encouragement can prevent their meal from dragging on indefinitely
- Throughout the meal, aim to be supportive, firm but relaxed – show them that mealtimes are a non-threatening, normal part of everyday life
- Your partner may feel very guilty for having eaten. Acknowledge that this is a huge effort for them, but don't patronise them, and avoid praising them for eating
- After a meal, suggest watching a film or doing something fun or creative together to help take their mind off compensatory behaviours such as over-exercising or purging
- Accept that some mealtimes will undoubtedly be disastrous. Don't worry about occasionally getting things wrong or making the odd inappropriate remark – you are only human

#### **Holidays and Celebrations**

Holiday and celebratory meals can be particularly difficult for someone suffering from an eating disorder. At these times, planning ahead can relieve stress and anxiety and the threat of eating in unfamiliar settings. By calling ahead you can find out what food will be available, so your partner can plan what they will eat or arrange to bring "safe" foods of their own.

If your partner gives their consent, being open about their eating disorder with family and friends can also help them to avoid excessive stress and anxiety and unwanted attention at holiday and celebratory meals.