

Eating Disorders:

Helpful things to say and do

Everyone experiencing an eating disorder will find different things helpful and unhelpful. It is important to talk to your loved one about what is most helpful in supporting them towards health.

Below is a list of some common helpful and unhelpful things to say and do. However, it is important to note that this will not be relevant to everyone.



Unhelpful: "Just eat!"

This reinforces that you have little understanding of the person's illness and how difficult it is to overcome. Always remember that eating a meal is their phobia.

Helpful: "Why don't you try to take a few more bites? I can see that this is a struggle for you, but we're trying to get you to a safe place."

This provides encouragement and support, but still allows the person to make their own decision.

Unhelpful: "Where is the loaf of bread I bought? Did you binge again?"

It can be frustrating when food disappears, but it is important to acknowledge the shame and guilt felt by people who binge. Try not to blame them for their behaviours and rather acknowledge that it represents a much bigger internal struggle.

Helpful: "I've noticed food disappearing and wondered how I can help? Are you struggling? Would you like to talk about it?"

Bingeing usually occurs to distract or numb the individual from emotional pain. Encourage the person to talk about their struggles and problem solve.

Unhelpful: "You better eat your meal otherwise I'll be really upset with you"
"If you don't finish your meal we'll need to go to hospital."

Refrain from making threats and taking an authoritative stance. This will only alienate the person.

Helpful: "I know how hard this is for you, but finishing your meal will be a great step towards getting better and showing the eating disorder that you are in charge."

This puts the control and power in the hands of your loved one and links it to their goals. It can also provide hope.

Unhelpful: "I can see vomit in the toilet. Have you been vomiting again?"

Refrain from blaming and pointing fingers. This will only result in the people feeling shameful and isolating themselves.

Unhelpful: "You don't look that sick."
"You look healthy/good/well."
"You look so much better."

Any comment about body, weight or shape can fire up the eating disorder. They can interpret the comments to mean they have gained weight or they are not sick enough.

Unhelpful: "I need an eating disorder to get rid of these extra kilos"
"I wish I could lose weight like you"

This is insensitive and highlights your lack of understanding of the horrors of an eating disorder. These types of comments glamorise and idealise the illness. No one chooses to have an eating disorder. Keep in mind the high rate of mortality and suicide in people with eating disorders.

Unhelpful: "I am also gluten free"
"I'm doing this new detox to lose weight for my friend's wedding"

Talking about your own diet is inappropriate. It reinforces that 'dieting' or cutting foods out is normal.

Unhelpful: "The doctor said you've gained some weight! That's fantastic!"

Focusing on weight gain can make the person feel like weight is the only thing that matters. This is likely to make them feel like you do not understand their struggle.

Helpful: "I've noticed that you are struggling with purging again and wondering if there is something I can do to help?"

This shows you are aware of the behaviour and willing to give support. It puts the power in the person's hands.

Helpful: Try not to make comments about physical appearance.

This emphasises the importance of appearance. It will almost always be misinterpreted and can trigger their eating disorder regardless of good intentions.

Helpful: Refrain from making comments about the person's weight or appearance.

Regardless of your good intentions this will only trigger the eating disorder. Do not go there!

Helpful: Try not to make comments about your own weight, diet or exercise.

Regardless of your good intentions this will only trigger the eating disorder.

Helpful: Refrain from making comments about the person's weight.

Focus on other areas of progress instead, such as strengthening friendships and freedom in food choices.

Unhelpful: "I don't understand why your team won't let you exercise"
"I can't believe your Dietitian makes you eat that. It can't be healthy!"

Questioning the person's treatment will compromise their trust in their treating team. This can lead them to refuse to follow treatment recommendations.

Helpful: "Your treating team know what is right for you - they are the experts!" "Your doctors have the expertise and know how to help you recover."

Refrain from making comments about food and your own food preferences. Always support the decisions of the treating team. Show that you are all a united front in fighting against the eating disorder.

Unhelpful: "We don't know what to do with you anymore."
"All this treatment isn't working."

Recovery can take years. Living with someone with an eating disorder can be very tiring. Take care of yourself so that you can best support your loved one.

Helpful: It is important to always hold hope for recovery.

Most people with an eating disorder question whether recovery is possible. Encourage them to keep fighting!

Unhelpful: Ignoring small progress.

Ignoring small steps forward can be interpreted that only full recovery is acceptable. This can feel unachievable and can result in the person stepping backwards.

Helpful: Acknowledge small achievements.

It is important to acknowledge small steps forward. This might include eating more or different foods, being more engaged in conversation, attending appointments and trying to meet a treatment goal.

Unhelpful: Doing or saying nothing after meals.

Eating well is the hardest part of the recovery journey. Each meal and snack can be a big challenge, and eating well can trigger feelings of guilt and shame.

Helpful: "I can see how hard this has been for you. Would you like to watch a movie?"

Acknowledging the person's struggle may or may not work. For some people, it can be very helpful to offer a quiet distraction after eating, when eating disorder thoughts are often at their worst.