

Separating the Person from the Illness

It is helpful to separate the person from the eating disorder. **This emphasises that it is the eating disorder that is the problem, not the person living with it.**

An eating disorder can be a very strong driving force that can cause a person to behave in ways that are not usual for them. This may involve secrecy and lying, and even aggression, frustration and anger. This may also involve self-destructive behaviours that are seemingly irrational, such as a refusal to eat and compulsive exercise. This can be difficult to understand for both the person with the eating disorder and their loved ones.

It may be tricky at times to see the difference between your loved one and the eating disorder. Separating the person from the eating disorder can help you to see the eating disorder as having a separate voice and thinking pattern to your loved one. This will help your loved one to feel that the eating disorder is the problem and will provide relief that they are not the problem. This helps to remove feelings of blame, guilt and shame, and means your loved one may be more open to confide in you about what is happening for them.

“Once I started to talk about the eating disorder as being the problem and not me, it freed me up to see that I really didn’t like the eating disorder. I didn’t like how it made me feel and do – I didn’t like what my life was with the eating disorder.”

If the eating disorder can be seen and addressed as separate from the person it means that together you can stand with your loved one and look at the problem. You can develop more of an understanding of the eating disorder and its intricacies whilst not judging your loved one. This will help your loved one to consider what they actually think about what the eating disorder is saying and will help them to begin to challenge it.

Separating the person from the eating disorder involves speaking about ‘the eating disorder’, rather than addressing the person as if the eating disorder is part of them.

For Example

- ‘How much of the time is the ‘eating disorder’ in control of what you’ve been eating?’
- ‘What aspects of the ‘eating disorder’ are you trying to challenge this week?’
- ‘Does the ‘eating disorder’ encourage you to be secretive about some of the behaviours? What would it be like to try be more open about them?’
- ‘What does the ‘eating disorder’ tell you about yourself?’
- ‘The ‘eating disorder’ seems louder this week, what do you think?’

“It took time for my parents to separate the eating disorder from me, but when they did it meant I was more receptive to being open about it, open about the thoughts and behaviours without feeling as much guilt and shame.

