



## **So your child has an eating disorder – 5 steps to get started**

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Finding out your child has an eating disorder may be some of the most difficult news you've ever received. Eating disorders are clouded in misunderstanding and misinformation, and having one in the family can feel very isolating.

As you organize treatment and recovery for your child, there are five things you can do to set yourself up for success. Because while the eating disorder is happening to your child, it's happening to you, too. Everyone is impacted when an eating disorder is in the family, so thinking about yourself isn't selfish; it's essential.

The more you understand what's going on and feel empowered to make a difference, the better things will be for all of you. Here's how to get started.

## **1. Ground yourself**

When you find out your child has an eating disorder it's natural to go into panic mode. Of course you're worried, even terrified, and you want to get your child into recovery as quickly as possible.

Panic is a natural response, but you'll want to separate productive panic, which activates you and moves you forward, from negative panic, which can send you spinning out. Negative panic often makes us lose focus and become less effective.

Ground yourself in the knowledge that yes, there are a lot of things to do, but this is a marathon, not a sprint. You can use productive panic to get things done. But don't let negative panic get in the way and derail you. You'll need a strong, calm mind to support your child through this.

## **2. Learn about eating disorders**

Eating disorders are deeply misunderstood and hardly ever talked about. And yet they are far more common than conditions like ADHD and autism. Unlike those conditions, which are openly discussed, eating disorders are often kept in the shadows.

Nonetheless, there is a lot of information available to help parents understand what's going on and how they can help.

The single most important piece of information for you to know is that an eating disorder is not a choice, and it's not something your child can turn on and off like a light switch. Even if it seems like it came out of nowhere, eating disorders are complex and usually have deeper roots than what's visible on the surface.

Don't feel discouraged if even your best, most thoughtful arguments don't shift your child's situation right away. Eating disorders appear simple, but they affect many different things including cognitive functioning, the nervous system, and psychology. This is why recovery is typically a team effort.

Knowledge about how eating disorders work will give you the foundation you need to be more productive and effective as an important member of your child's recovery team.

## **3. Focus on feeding and eating together**

One of the first things your child's treatment team will ask them to do is eat regular meals and snacks. But that's hard for someone with an eating disorder to do alone. Work with your child's team to establish a regular schedule for feeding and eating with your child.

You can support your child's recovery by reminding them to eat, serving them food regularly, having food available at all times, and working with them on their resistance to eating.

If at all possible, aim to have at least one family meal together each day. This means all family members share a similar meal at the same table, at the same time. It's important to make family meals as pleasant as possible, so focus on positive conversations and leave the tough talk about things like homework, grievances, and chores for later.

#### **4. Build family connection and belonging**

Beyond eating enough food, the next best thing for your child's mental health is feeling as if they are connected to you and belong in the family. Social connections are [more important to lifelong health](#) than any other health behavior, and families are an essential building block.

Your child may not be at their best right now, and it can be hard to build a connection with someone who's in the middle of an eating disorder, but you can still make progress.

Look for opportunities to spend time together as a family. Work on your family communication patterns, starting with your own. Learning how to communicate more effectively with your family will go a long way in supporting connection and belonging.

Meaningful human connection rests on something called "felt safety," or a person's perception of being seen, heard, understood, and valuable by the people around them. Someone with an eating disorder is typically living with a great deal of anxiety and emotional dysregulation, so it's hard for them to feel safe, even at home. Building belonging in your family is a key way to help your child feel safe.

#### **5. Ask for help**

Navigating eating disorder recovery will be hard for everyone in your family. Try not to withdraw from your extended family, friends, and others. Instead, reach out and ask for support during this tough time. This doesn't necessarily

mean that you have to talk about the eating disorder with everyone, but you should be intentional about letting people know that you could use a little extra love and care right now.

Your friends and family members can help with things like driving your child to appointments, overseeing meals when you need a break, or giving you comfort when things get hard.

Also, don't be afraid to reach out for professional support. A good therapist, counselor, or coach can support you in getting the education you need to feel more confident about this challenging chapter in your life. They can also listen to you when you're having hard feelings and need a compassionate ear. Your child needs your support to recover, and you'll need people to support you simultaneously.

Article written by **Ginny Jones**, the founder of [More-Love.org](https://www.more-love.org), an online resource that supports parents who have kids with eating disorders. She's on a mission to change the conversation about eating disorders and empower people to recover.