



Ngā Māuiui Kai

*Whānau Māori stories of
eating issues and eating disorders*

He kai kei aku ringa

There is food at the end of my hands

Māori in Aotearoa are just as likely as non-Māori to struggle with their eating, but often can't find resources to help that are written from a Māori perspective.

We created this pukapuka for whānau Māori who are supporting someone with an eating issue or eating disorder.

We interviewed Māori who had struggled with their eating, as well as mātua and kaumātua who had looked after tamariki and mokopuna with eating difficulties. We asked:

What do whānau Māori need to know when supporting someone experiencing ngā māuiui kai? Their kōrero is shared throughout this pukapuka; you will see it in italics.

The above whakataukī is about having the means or control of providing food or making a living for oneself and one's whānau. We open with this whakataukī as it reflects the responsibility that whānau Māori feel to care for and manaaki each other through hard times with ngā māuiui kai, and the strength and resilience they draw on during this haerenga.



This pukapuka was developed by **Gloria Fraser** (Kāi Tahu, Kāti Māmoe, Waitaha) and **Bailey Mary Rose** (Ngāti Maniapoto, Ngāti Tūwharetoa), from Te Herenga Waka (Victoria University of Wellington) and Te Tira Wānanga Māuiui Kai (the Māori Eating Disorders / Eating Issues Network; a rōpū of eating disorder researchers, clinicians, and experts-by-experience). **Olivia Faulkner** (Tangata Tiriti) provided research assistance for this project.

Te Tira Wānanga Māuiui Kai has also created a papakupu: A te reo Māori glossary of kupu for eating disorders.

You can find this at <https://tinyurl.com/ngamauiuikai>

He aha ngā māuiui kai?

What are eating issues and eating disorders?

Māuiui is to be tired, sick, unwell, out of sorts, or out of balance. Kai is food. So, ngā māuiui kai is to be out of balance or out of sorts in relation to food.

Ngā māuiui kai can take many different forms. People experiencing ngā māuiui kai might:

- Limit their kai
- Eat lots of kai at once
- Feel out of control when eating
- Try to get rid of the kai they have eaten or avoid weight gain by vomiting, exercising, fasting, or taking laxatives or diet pills
- Avoid certain foods or types of food

People can struggle with their kai for lots of different reasons. Sometimes ngā māuiui kai is related to how we feel about our body, but not always: often it's a way to cope with other life stressors and pressures.

Whānau Māori that we spoke to emphasised that eating issues and eating disorders can be life threatening, and many wished they had known earlier how serious they can be.



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Eating disorders aren't really anything to do with what you look like, you can be unwell at any size in an eating disorder.

I see it as taha tinana, taha wairua, taha hinengaro, taha whānau as well. **Eating disorders can have an impact on all those things, not just our physical health or how we perceive ourselves to look, but it has an impact on our mental health, and your whānau and your friendships.** Whether it's by choice or not you do isolate because you're no longer participating in things that are important in Māori culture like kai.



Ngā tūtohu māuiui kai

Signs of eating issues and eating disorders

If someone in your whānau is experiencing ngā māuiui kai you might see changes in their eating, like eating less, eating lots of food at once, refusing some foods, or wanting to eat alone. You might also notice physical symptoms, like weight changes or feeling tired and low energy.

Ngā māuiui kai can make people isolate from their whānau, or feel sad, anxious, or more irritable than usual. Some people become very focused on sport and exercise. Others might seem fine or appear to be doing well but are struggling to open up. If you're worried about a whānau member, remember you know your whānau best - trust that worry and find out more about what's happening for them.





In the whole year that I had the eating disorder I didn't go home at all because I didn't want my family to see me or to know that I had an eating disorder.

“

I wish that my whānau and friends knew the warning signs or were able to spot certain red flags cause a lot of them throughout did express concern to me, they said like, oh my gosh you've lost a lot of weight are you okay, but as soon as I said I'm okay, it wouldn't go beyond that, they'd just go okay, I believe you. I wish they had more information, more awareness about the kinds of things that eating disorders make you do and how they make you want to isolate yourself further so that people don't notice.

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Ngā take whakahirahira kia mōhiotia

Important issues to be aware of

There are many myths and stereotypes about who experiences eating issues and eating disorders, and these can be barriers to seeking help. In reality, ngā māuiui kai does not discriminate – anyone can struggle with their eating, regardless of body shape or size, gender, age, or ethnicity.

When people make comments about others' eating habits and bodies it can be really unhelpful for people experiencing ngā māuiui kai. Whānau Māori can help by shifting the focus from kai and appearance, and taking a supportive, non-judgemental approach.

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The language we use is key, a lot of Māori whānau joke about eating disorders, they joke about how big people are and how much kai people eat and the types of kai. For me I want whānau to realise that they can either be part of the problem or the solution, we chose to be the solution.

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“The prevailing narrative was it's a white girl's disorder. That informed a lot of my misunderstanding of my eating and body struggles, cause in my head I was like, oh no, I shouldn't struggle with this cause I'm Māori, it would be weird if someone like me was to develop an eating disorder. **I think it's really important to start smashing down narratives of who has eating disorders. It's not just a certain kind of person, anyone can have an eating disorder.**”



“People saying "man you look good" was counter productive, or people saying "you look terrible" has the same effect, or "oh that's good that you're eating that". **Any sort of judgement is harmful.**”

Ehara i te haere takitahi, he haere ā-whānau kē

It's not an individual journey, it's a family journey

Whānau Māori we interviewed talked about the importance of challenging ngā māuiui kai together as a whānau, not blaming the person struggling with kai, and figuring out what might be driving the eating issue or eating disorder. Many whānau shared that they had avoided kōrero about hard topics and feelings before supporting their tamariki and mokopuna with ngā māuiui kai and are now working on being more open with each other.

Whānau who had accessed eating disorder therapy said that recovery from ngā māuiui kai means healing your relationship with kai by nourishing your body and brain. Whānau support is crucial in making this happen because eating regularly, eating enough, and eating a range of kai can be really scary for people with eating issues and eating disorders.



“The issue is not an individual issue for me, **this issue is a whānau issue** and if one of my whānau members can become unwell, then we can all become unwell so it's all of our job to get us all well.



Sometimes the individual is symptomatic of what's going on in the wider whānau and that's how it's manifesting, and **we have to take stock and have a look around at what's happening. How can we strengthen our whānau**, not just cause one individual's sick but build our whānau resilience going forward, how can we do that?

Our first session was helping us to understand anorexia's like **a spell**, a spell that's come over the person and the spell is telling them in their head that they look like that, they look like this, they can't do this, they can't do that, they must exercise, they must do all of these things, whether it's real or not that's what it is. **Our job as whānau is to break that spell, and to tell them actually this is what we should be doing, not what the spell tells them.**



Me kimi āwhina ki whea

Where to seek help

Whānau Māori who shared their stories for this pukapuka wanted other whānau to seek help early. Support for Māori experiencing ngā māuiui kai can take many forms, including from:

- Wider whānau
- General Practitioners (who are often an avenue to accessing other supports and services)
- Whānau Ora and Kaupapa Māori services
- Marae and iwi-based supports
- Specialist eating disorder services
- Hospital-based Māori liaisons and advisors
- Private mental health practitioners (some people qualify for funded mental health support through an ACC sensitive claim or MSD disability allowance)



“ Māori are speaking out more now, **we've just got such a fire in our puku**. I love seeing it, because, there's **kaua e whakamā aye?** **Don't be ashamed of your pūrākau**, it's your pūrākau and no one can take that from you. ”

“ You've got to restore that mana and that spirit back into that person, so that they're whole again and you have to do together. ”





He mihi

Acknowledgements

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This resource was developed by members of **Te Tira Wānanga Māuiui Kai**. Tira is a word for grouping (e.g., rangatira: to weave groups together). Wānanga is to contemplate, think deeply, or spend time (wā) on.

To give feedback about this pukapuka, or to find out more about Te Tira Wānanga Māuiui Kai, email:

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