



# Mealtime support for eating disorders

## How to use this workbook

This workbook is designed to be used as a companion to the Mealtime support training video.

As you watch the video, use this document to follow along with the core concepts and record your initial thoughts. It serves as a bridge between watching the training and applying these skills.

### Learning outcomes

By completing this training and the accompanying workbook exercises, you will be able to:

1. Identify the “4 C’s” framework (Calm, Confident, Consistent, Compassionate).
2. Identify supportive actions and language to build your confidence to support mealtimes.



# Before you begin

## Self-reflection on eating and body image

We live in a society where diet culture is normalised, and thinness or muscularity is considered attractive and healthy.

Being aware of your own personal attitudes, values and beliefs towards eating, body shape and weight is essential in being able to respond effectively to a person experiencing an eating disorder or issue.

### To support this in practice, care providers should avoid the following:

- » Commenting positively or negatively on your own or the person's weight, shape or appearance
- » Comments that reinforce the idea that physical appearance is important to happiness or success
- » Giving advice about weight loss
- » Making special accommodations outside best-practice guidelines for the person you are supporting
- » Reactive responses to the feeling the person's eating disorder symptoms creates

Take a moment to check in with yourself. Our own values can sometimes change how we talk or act without us even realising it. Keeping your own views 'at the door' helps you stay focused on the person's needs.



# Core principles: The 4 C's

Meal support is about more than just the food on the tray. For a person with an eating disorder, mealtimes are a battlefield of intrusive thoughts. Our goal is to use these four pillars to reduce anxiety and build trust.



## 1. Be calm

Your presence sets the tone for the room.

- » **Identity vs. illness:** When someone is unwell, the eating disorder can “take the wheel,” changing how they act or speak. Remember to think of the person you are caring for—you aren’t fighting the person; you’re helping the person fight the illness.
- » **Checking our own biases:** We all carry “stigma”—hidden prejudices or assumptions about why people have eating disorders. Non-judgmental support is your most powerful tool.
- » **The goal:** By separating the person from the illness, it becomes easier to stay kind and calm. Maintain a steady, reassuring tone, even if the person you’re supporting becomes distressed.



## 2. Be confident

Your confidence helps the person you are supporting feel safe.

- » **Set clear boundaries:** State the expectation before the meal starts, for example:  
“You have 30 minutes to eat.”
- » **Coach and validate:** Use phrases like:  
“I can see this is hard, but I’m right here with you.”
- » **Address behaviours:** If you see food being moved or hidden, address it firmly but kindly:  
“Please keep the food on your plate.”
- » **Avoid negotiation:** Do not debate the menu or portions. Use the phrase:  
“This is what your body needs. Let’s focus on finishing—you can discuss it with the team later.”





### 3. Be consistent

Consistency minimises the “loopholes” that an eating disorder thrives on. The following quote speaks to how a person feels when they are supported well:

“The people who helped me most were steady, kind, and firm every time. That made me feel safer.”



### 4. Be compassionate

Support doesn't end when the tray is cleared.

- » **The post-meal window:** Stay nearby after the meal. This is when guilt and physical discomfort can be at their highest.
- » **Distraction is key:** Offer light conversation, a card game, or TV.
- » **Safety first:** Ensure there is no bathroom access post-meal to prevent compensatory behaviours.

## Summary for practice

Principle	Key action
<b>Calm</b>	Use a steady voice; separate the person from the illness
<b>Confident</b>	Set time limits; avoid negotiating the meal plan
<b>Consistent</b>	Follow the same guidelines every time to build a sense of safety
<b>Compassionate</b>	Provide 30 minutes of post-meal distraction and supervision



# Watch the video, then take 5–10 minutes to reflect.

1. What stood out to you most from the video?



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2. What are two practical things you'll try in your next shift to support someone at mealtime?



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3. How can you use the 4 C's (Calm, Confident, Consistent, Compassionate) in your practice?



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4. What's one phrase from the "things to say" list you could try?



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5. What's one thing from the "things to avoid" list you've noticed before?  
How might you handle it differently now?



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6. Who could you go to for support if you're finding meal support difficult?



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# Myths & misconceptions about eating disorders/issues

**MYTH:** “They’re just being fussy or difficult.”

**FACT:** Eating disorders are serious mental illnesses. Mealtimes can trigger intense fear and distress, even if it doesn’t make sense from the outside.

**MYTH:** “They just need to eat.”

**FACT:** If it were that simple, they’d be well already. Recovery takes time, support, and consistent care.

**MYTH:** “Only young women get eating disorders.”

**FACT:** Eating disorders affect all genders, ages, cultures, and body types—including Māori and Pasifika communities.

**MYTH:** “Talking about food and weight helps.”

**FACT:** These topics can make things worse. Focus on support, not on appearance, calories, or diet talk.

**MYTH:** “They’re doing it for attention.”

**FACT:** Most people with eating disorders go to great lengths to hide their struggles. It’s not a choice—it’s an illness.

**Remember:** Your calm, confident, consistent, and compassionate support really does make a difference.



# Meal Support Checklist & Guidelines

## Before the meal:

- Know the meal plan
- Set up a calm, safe environment
- Remind yourself: **You are supporting the person, not arguing with the illness**

## During the meal:

- Stay with the person at all times
- Use a calm, warm, firm tone
- Offer gentle coaching if they're struggling:  
"Can you take another bite?"  
"I'm here with you—you're doing great."
- Watch for eating disorder behaviours:
  - Hiding food
  - Cutting food into tiny pieces
  - Delaying or avoiding bites
- Avoid negotiating about food—refer concerns to the treatment team
- Use distraction if needed: light chat, puzzles, music

## After the meal:

- Supervise as needed
- Offer calm distractions (TV, game, conversation)
- Stay with them if distress is high

## Always remember the 4 C's:

**Calm | Confident | Consistent | Compassionate**





## Helpful things to say

“I know this is hard, you’re doing really well.”

“I’m right here with you.”

“Let’s take it one bite at a time.”

“You’re being really brave.”



## Avoid saying

“Just eat it.”

“You’ll feel better if you eat.”

“You look healthy now.”

(can be misinterpreted as “you’ve gained weight”)

“Other people have it worse.”

“You’re being difficult.”



## Helpful things to do

- » Sit beside them
- » Keep your tone calm and warm
- » Offer distraction if they’re distressed
- » Validate their feelings: “I can see this is really tough for you.”



## Avoid doing

- » Arguing with the eating disorder
- » Commenting on appearance
- » Discussing weight, calories, or diet
- » Leaving them alone during or straight after meals



## Next steps for learning

### [Poster | Supporting individuals with an eating disorder](#)

This poster resource was created by advocates with lived experience of eating disorders and is designed to empower those providing support, whether in non-specialist hospitals, schools, or the community.

It offers practical strategies and guidance to help caregivers, educators, and healthcare providers work effectively with individuals navigating these serious conditions.

### [Online learning: Eating disorders | Issues – core skills for the well-being workforce](#)

**Duration:** Approx. 3 Hours

**Eating disorders:** Core skills is an introductory training to equip care providers to identify and respond when a person is experiencing an eating disorder.



## Mealtime support – Pocket lanyard card

The information below is designed so you can print it out and attach it to your lanyard for easy reference

### Mealtime support reminders

**Calm** → Keep your tone steady

**Confident** → Trust the plan, no negotiation

**Consistent** → Same expectations every time

**Compassionate** → Show empathy, remember this is difficult

### Helpful phrases

#### Encourage & coach

“I’m right here with you.”

“Let’s take it one bite at a time.”

#### Validate distress

“I know it’s hard, but you’re doing so well.”

“You’re brave, keep going.”

#### Refocus on treatment goals

“Finishing this meal brings you one step closer to your goals.”

**Remember:** Support the person, not the illness.  
Your presence matters

