

HELPING A LOVED ONE: FAMILIES AND CARERS

A compassionate guide to support, boundaries and
your own wellbeing



SPACE TO BREATHE

A supportive information article by Maggie Learoyd

Helping a Loved One: Families and Carers

Caring for someone with an eating disorder can feel like living with uncertainty. You may be frightened, exhausted or unsure whether you are helping. You are not expected to know everything. Your steadiness, willingness to learn and ability to stay connected can be valuable parts of a wider professional support plan.

Your role

You are a supporter, not the whole treatment team. Help the person attend appointments, communicate concerns and follow agreed plans. Ask clinicians what your role should be, particularly around meals, exercise and post-meal support. Keep emergency information accessible and record important changes when this would help clinical conversations.

Connection before correction

Eating-disorder thoughts can make ordinary conversations feel threatening. Use calm, simple language and validate the emotion without agreeing with the disorder: 'I can hear how frightening this feels, and I am staying with you.' Avoid arguments about logic during high distress. Return to boundaries when everyone is calmer.

Mealtimes and routines

Preparation and predictability may reduce anxiety. Follow the treatment team's guidance, keep conversation neutral and avoid negotiating with the eating disorder at the table. Plan a gentle activity afterwards when recommended. For neurodivergent people, consider noise, lighting, smells, texture, seating and unexpected change.

Boundaries without abandonment

A boundary can protect both people: what you can do, what you cannot do, and what will happen if safety is at risk. State it kindly and consistently. Do not keep dangerous secrets. If the person is a child or lacks immediate safety, involve appropriate adults or services even if they ask you not to.

The carer needs care

Fear can shrink your own life. Keep medical appointments, rest, relationships and activities where possible. Find a carer group, trusted professional or friend who can hear your feelings without placing them on the person who is unwell. Needing help does not mean you are failing; it helps make support sustainable.

Family life and siblings

Siblings may feel frightened, overlooked, angry or guilty. Give honest age-appropriate information without making them responsible for monitoring. Preserve individual time and ordinary routines where possible. Explain that different support is not favouritism. Adults can acknowledge the disruption while protecting the ill person's privacy. Family sessions or carer support may help everyone communicate without blame.

Prepare for difficult conversations

Choose one aim and one or two facts rather than unloading every fear at once. Speak when neither person is highly activated. If the conversation escalates, pause and agree when to return. Written communication may help people who struggle to process spoken language. Keep safety non-negotiable while allowing choice about how support is delivered. Repetition is often necessary; consistency matters more than a perfect speech.

Build a sustainable carer plan

List the tasks only you can do, tasks others can share and tasks that can wait. Arrange respite, meals, sleep and your own medical care. Keep emergency contacts and clinical guidance together. Decide who can update wider family so you do not repeat distressing information. Notice signs of burnout—irritability, hopelessness, insomnia, isolation—and seek help early. Sustainable care is steadier than care driven by exhaustion.

Important

This resource offers general information and emotional support. It cannot diagnose an eating disorder and is not a substitute for medical assessment, specialist treatment or an individual care plan.

If someone is in immediate danger, has collapsed, has severe confusion, chest pain, difficulty breathing, signs of serious dehydration, or an immediate risk of self-harm or suicide, call 999 or go to A&E.; For urgent advice, contact NHS 111.

Further information

- NHS: Eating disorders overview - nhs.uk/mental-health/feelings-symptoms-behaviours/behaviours/eating-disorders/overview/
- NICE guideline NG69: Eating disorders: recognition and treatment - nice.org.uk/guidance/ng69
- Beat: Information and support - beateatingdisorders.org.uk

Beat Helpline: 0808 801 0677 | Childline (under 19): 0800 1111

Until next time, give yourself space to breathe.