

SPACE TO BREATHE THERAPY • SUPPORT HUB

Social Eating When Food Feels Difficult

Meals out, celebrations and connection without shame

Food is woven into birthdays, work, family time and friendship. When eating feels unsafe, social events can bring fear about being watched, uncertain portions, unfamiliar food or comments about bodies. Avoidance may reduce anxiety briefly but can also deepen isolation.

UNDERSTAND

NOTICE

SUPPORT

INSIDE THIS GUIDE

- Common pressure points
- Planning without creating more rules
- Supporting someone at the table

Use this guide to understand, begin a conversation, or help someone feel less alone.

You do not need to read it all at once. Pause whenever you need to and return when you feel ready.

A compassionate information guide

This resource offers general information and does not replace individual medical or specialist eating-disorder care.

Understanding what may be happening

Common pressure points

- Not knowing what food will be served or when.
- Feeling observed, compared or expected to explain choices.
- Comments about dieting, calories, exercise, weight or “being good”.
- Sensory overload, crowded rooms and unfamiliar smells or textures.
- Pressure to finish, try something new or eat at another person’s pace.

Planning without creating more rules

- Look at practical details in advance, but notice when checking becomes reassurance-seeking.
- Agree a supported plan with your clinician or dietitian.
- Choose a safe person who knows how to help discreetly.
- Have a boundary phrase ready: “I’m not discussing bodies or diets today.”
- Build in regulation before and after without using compensation.

Supporting someone at the table

- Keep conversation away from appearance, portions and moral labels for food.
- Do not praise eating less or pressure someone to eat more publicly.
- Offer companionship and calm normality.
- Ask privately what is helpful rather than assuming.

Gentle, practical ways forward

Support should always be adapted to the person, their diagnosis, physical health, culture, neurotype and treatment plan.

WHAT MAY HELP

- Start with a manageable situation, not the hardest event.
- Sit where you feel less overwhelmed and plan transport or a quiet pause.
- Use grounding: feet on the floor, slower exhale, notice five neutral details.
- Return to the next planned meal or snack after the event.
- Review what helped, not whether the experience was perfect.

A gentle reminder

The goal is not to perform “normal eating” for others. It is to rebuild nourishment, choice and connection at a pace that supports treatment.

Please seek urgent help for fainting, chest pain, confusion, severe weakness, uncontrolled vomiting, blood, serious dehydration, or immediate risk of harm. In the UK call 999/A&E; for an emergency, NHS 111 for urgent advice, or contact your GP/eating-disorder team.

Trusted information

NHS: Eating disorders overview

<https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/feelings-symptoms-behaviours/behaviours/eating-disorders/overview/>

NICE: Eating disorders: recognition and treatment (NG69)

<https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng69>

Royal College of Psychiatrists: Medical Emergencies in Eating Disorders (MEED)

<https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/improving-care/campaigning-for-better-mental-health-policy/college-reports/2022-college-reports/cr233>

Beat: Eating-disorder information and support

<https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/>

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