

# Supporting a child with an eating problem

A guide for parents and carers



# We're talking mental health.

If your child is experiencing difficulties with eating or has been diagnosed with an eating disorder, it can be a worrying, isolating and distressing time for you as a parent or carer.

This booklet helps provide you with the knowledge and skills you need to support your child. We hope it reassures you that you are not alone and gives you hope that people do recover from an eating disorder.

This booklet is written by  
**Jenny Langley** and **Ros Rea**  
for the Charlie Waller Trust.

Please help our resources have a greater impact: consider sharing this booklet with someone who might also benefit from it instead of recycling it.

# Understanding eating problems

## What does an eating problem look like?

Eating problems can have many physical and psychological signs, for example:



### BEHAVIOURAL

Eating too little or too much, exercising excessively, counting calories, being irritable, angry, tearful or anxious. Avoiding social situations, withdrawing, socially isolating or being secretive around food or meals.



### PSYCHOLOGICAL

Feeling your self-worth and self-esteem depend on body shape and weight, being rule-driven, feeling out of control.



### PHYSICAL

Rapid weight loss, no energy, difficulty sleeping, low heart rate and/or blood pressure, dizziness or fainting, palpitations, dental erosion, changes in menstrual cycle.



### COGNITIVE

Struggling to concentrate: brain function is affected, which impacts on attention, memory and processing information.

## Important truths

It can be difficult to understand why people develop an eating disorder and, although we still don't fully understand what causes them, it can include biological, genetic, psychological, behavioural and social-cultural factors. We do know that eating disorders are often about feelings which can adversely affect food intake. They may also be a way of coping with feeling out of control.

The reasons are different for each person but it's important to remember these truths:

## Nine truths about eating disorders

- 1 Many people with eating disorders look healthy yet may be extremely ill.
- 2 Families are not to blame and can be the person's best support in recovery.
- 3 An eating disorder diagnosis is a health crisis that disrupts personal and family functioning.
- 4 Eating disorders are not choices, but serious biologically influenced illnesses.
- 5 Eating disorders affect people of all genders, ages, races, ethnicities, body shapes and weights, sexual orientations and socioeconomic status.
- 6 Eating disorders carry an increased risk for both suicide and medical complications.
- 7 Genes and environment play important roles in the development of eating disorders.
- 8 Genes alone do not predict who will develop eating disorders.
- 9 Full recovery from an eating disorder is possible. Early detection and intervention are important.

(The 'Nine Truths' were produced by the Academy for Eating Disorders in collaboration with Dr Cynthia Bulik PhD, FAED, Distinguished Professor of Eating Disorders in the School of Medicine at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.)

## What are the main types of eating disorder?

We've listed some of the most common eating disorders, with their typical characteristics (although these may vary slightly). If your child has a difficult relationship with food and exhibits some of these signs or others that are concerning, please consult your GP.

### Anorexia nervosa

Severely limiting food and drink, preoccupation with weight and shape, fear of weight gain. Distorted body image (body dysmorphia). Increased activity, exercise, purging, use of laxatives and/or diuretics.

### Bulimia nervosa

Eating large amounts of food (bingeing) then compensating through purging, increased or excessive exercising, vomiting, using laxatives and/or diuretics or fasting.

### Binge eating disorder

Eating large amounts of food (bingeing) but no purging, accompanied by feeling unable to stop eating even when full.

### Avoidant restrictive food intake disorder (ARFID)

Avoiding certain types of foods. This can be due to sensory issues, fear of what might happen or low interest in eating; common in people with autism.

### Other specified feeding or eating disorder (OSFED)

Eating difficulties that cause significant distress, but do not fit the expected symptoms of another eating disorder. Signs might include secretive behaviour around food, low confidence, poor body image, mood swings, social withdrawal, feelings of shame or anxiety.

# Spot the signs

There are often signs that your child may have an eating problem.

## Spot the signs using the A B C D E framework:

A

### Absence

A child with an eating problem may not show up for food-related activities.

B

### Body

They may worry obsessively about the shape of their body.

C

### Control

They may be compulsively in control, or out of control, of food.

D

### Diet

They might radically change their diet.

E

### Exercise

They may exercise excessively or obsessively.

### Learn more:

[familymentalwealth.com/spotthesigns](http://familymentalwealth.com/spotthesigns)

If you've spotted any of these signs, early intervention is key – this means getting the help and support that you and your loved one need. The main thing is to start the conversation.

# The impact of eating disorders

Eating disorders can have a significant impact on day-to-day life – both for the person with the eating disorder and for their parents, carers, siblings and other family members.

If your loved one is starved, this can have a physical impact upon their brain. Their memory, concentration and ability to process things change as the white matter, the part of the brain that helps the body process information, shrinks.

Eating disorders can have a significant impact, both physically and psychologically. If physical risk is a concern, medical monitoring is essential, please seek medical help immediately via your GP, A&E, or 111. Trust your instincts as a parent or carer and act on them.

## You should have your loved one assessed urgently if they show any of the following:

- Very low weight: percentage median Body Mass Index less than 70% (approx. below 0.4th BMI centile). Check with a GP or eating disorders service for an accurate measurement.
- Recent loss of 1kg or more for two consecutive weeks in an undernourished person.
- Rapid weight loss in someone of any weight.
- Little or no nutrition for over five days.
- Acute food refusal or less than 500kcal a day for more than two days.
- Physical struggles with carers over nutrition.
- Fluid refusal or signs of dehydration.
- Heart rate below 40 beats per minute.
- Core temperature below 35 C.
- Excessive exercise (more than two hours a day).
- Daily purging.
- Self-harm.
- Thoughts of suicide and/or intent to act on these thoughts.

This list was produced by the Royal College of Psychiatrists; Medical emergencies in eating disorders (MEED): Guidance on recognition and management (CR233); [rcpsych.ac.uk](http://rcpsych.ac.uk)

# Giving the best support



## Practical ideas for your child

### Help them spot the signs of an eating disorder

Helping your child to recognise that they may have an eating disorder can be difficult: some young people find it hard to see. You could explain that the way eating disorders present themselves and how people experience them can vary hugely from person to person; and they may be different from what your child has seen or read about.

Your child may not want to tell anyone about their eating difficulties as they may feel that they are not serious enough. They may be feeling guilty, embarrassed or ashamed. Acknowledge and validate their concerns, take them seriously, and discuss how you can help them right now.

### Talk openly

You could ask them: "What thoughts and feelings are you experiencing, how are these affecting your eating right now? How long do you feel you've been trying to manage these difficulties? How can I support you?" Try to acknowledge how brave they have been in talking and how difficult it seems for them right now. Reassure them that together you will get through this.



### Validate their emotions

Even when we don't understand our loved one's behaviours or emotional responses, it is so important to acknowledge how they are feeling, as that is their reality. "What you're going through right now sounds really tough, I can understand why you might be feeling..." (use their words to reflect this back). Try not to 'fix' the issues, just validate their feelings.

Eating disorders are not logical, try not to argue logic with the eating disorder. Come alongside your loved one and ask them 'how can I help?'



## Practical ideas for you

Remember, as well as ideas to support your child you should also think about how you can support yourself. If you're exhausted, you can't be as effective when caring for your loved one.

### Take time out for yourself

Make sure you have your own 'time out' and find ways to relax, laugh, get out in the fresh air, or whatever works for you.

### Use your support network

When friends or family offer help, accept it graciously and give them a specific task. Often people want to help but don't know how, so have a list of jobs in mind that you can dish out to willing helpers.

By looking after yourself, you are role modelling that self-care is very important and that there is more to life than the eating disorder.



Often carers of loved ones with an eating disorder feel they always have to 'get it right'. It's really important to remember to be as compassionate to yourself as you would be to others. You're not always going to say the right thing and sometimes all your strategies to keep calm will go out of the window. When things are calmer, go back and talk about what happened and think about how the situation could be managed if it happens again.

When your loved one has an eating disorder you are balancing physical and emotional risk. If it is safe, patience is key to coming alongside your loved one and waiting for them to feel able to move forward. It is really important to reinforce positive things and experiences – look for those 'green shoots,' new growth or changes – this will also help you as a parent or carer to hold on to hope.



### Golden guidelines for carers

- ✓ Remember your loved one is ill.
- ✓ Look after yourself first.
- ✓ Remember that the eating disorder has a purpose – perhaps offering a sense of control or identity.
- ✓ Try not to focus all your attention on the eating disorder behaviours.
- ✓ Don't try to 'fix' your loved one.
- ✓ Support your loved one.

Read more: [newmaudsleycarers-kent.co.uk/golden-guidelines-for-carers](http://newmaudsleycarers-kent.co.uk/golden-guidelines-for-carers)

### Don't suffer in silence

Find someone to talk to – a trusted friend or family member, or a local support group, or a call or message to a support line can help. Talking openly and confidentially will ease your burden of worry and help you see what you can do to make things better.

### Celebrate small successes

Try to remember that the battles your child experiences, and the successes they achieve in their recovery journey, may not be visible but they are still very real to them. Seeing your child sat at the dinner table but not eating may seem to be a failure but they will have fought and won many battles in their own mind just to agree to come to the table and be present. Acknowledge the steps they take in their internal battles, even if they are not visible to you.

## More practical ideas for you

- If you are worried, write down everything you are noticing, in particular changes around food (especially the emergence of rigid rules), mood, body image and self-esteem, exercise, social withdrawal and weight.
- Familiarise yourself with the early warning signs. Useful tips on this can be found at **Beat** and **Family Mental Wealth**.
- Show compassion to your loved one and offer support – “I notice you are struggling and I am here to help”, rather than “I think you have an eating disorder.”
- Book an appointment with your GP at the earliest opportunity (even if your local eating disorder service has a self-referral option, it is likely the GP will need to do physical tests.) Beat has a useful leaflet: **GP Leaflet (First Steps)**
- Be persistent. If your GP doesn't acknowledge there is a problem, ask for a second opinion and/ or keep going back every week if necessary to provide an update around the signs you are observing.
- Talk to others who have experience of eating disorders. This might be family and friends, a local support group, or any of the eating disorder charities such as **Beat**, **FEAST** or **First Steps Eating Disorders**.
- Sign up for **FEAST 30 Days**. You will receive an email every day for 30 days packed full of practical tips and useful resources created by parents and carers. This is a global community recommended by the authors of this booklet.
- Join support groups or networks and sign up for carer skills workshops (see page 19) at the earliest opportunity. Knowledge and understanding can really help you to come alongside your loved one, and connect and support them in their battle with the eating disorder.
- Look after yourself. This is crucial. Take time out as much as you can. This may include asking others to help out. You will be role modelling to your loved one that there is more to life than their eating disorder, and also that change is possible.



# What can you do 'in the moment'?

It can feel really tough to stay supportive when your loved one has an eating problem.

## Here are some things which parents and carers find useful:

- Offer lots of affirmation and validate their feelings where you can.
- Try to stay calm and acknowledge the difficulties.
- Use language that is supportive: "I can see that you're..."
- Give more attention to the behaviours you like and less attention to those you don't like.

Talk to the person not the illness.

Listen

Ask "What can I do to distract you?"

Give yourself permission to step away for a moment if you feel yourself becoming emotionally overwhelmed.

# Healthy coping ideas for supporting children and young people

Think together about the kind of things that help your child feel better when they are feeling bored, lonely, angry, stressed or tired. Then when they feel the urge to use unhealthy behaviours, you can try and work out together what emotions might be causing them and use positive distractions.

The **BLAST** acronym below may offer some helpful suggestions for you to think about alongside your loved one. Focus on things you can relate to and would work for you.

A change of scenery can help. Go outside if you can, or even a different room can spark inspiration for something to do.

**B**ORED



**L**ONELY

Contact a friend or family member who helps you to feel connected.

Writing down your frustrations can be a helpful way to identify where they are coming from.

**A**NGRY



**S**TRESSED

Sometimes, when things become overwhelming, a to do list can help. If that's too much, choose one achievable task and try to complete it.

If your body isn't fuelled you're going to feel tired. Take things easy and watch a movie or TV series.

**T**IRED





# What other parents have said

Separate your child from the eating disorder. It can seem all-consuming but your child is still in there.

Try to keep family routines as normal as possible. This can be especially helpful for siblings or others in the household.

Always make sure they feel loved and supported – tell them, show them, hug them.

Spend as much time as possible doing fun family activities, games or other distractions, rather than always being sucked into endless discussions or arguments around food, weight or shape.

A weekly family meeting helps us. We talk about our feelings, plan meals and generally check up on each other.

# Looking for further help?

Here are some organisations which offer direct advice and support.

## BEAT EATING DISORDERS

**Call:** England 0808 801 0677  
Scotland 0808 801 0432  
Wales 0808 801 0433  
Northern Ireland 0808 801 0434  
**Online:** [beateatingdisorders.org.uk](http://beateatingdisorders.org.uk)

Phone or webchat 1pm-9pm weekdays,  
5pm-9pm weekends and bank holidays

Information and support for anybody affected by eating disorders. Includes a support hub for carers with resources, learning and forums, plus peer support and online development

## FIRST STEPS

**Online:** [firststepsed.co.uk](http://firststepsed.co.uk)

Wide range of support services for children and their families, young people and adults affected by eating difficulties and disorders, including befriending services.

## HUB OF HOPE

**Online:** [hubofhope.co.uk](http://hubofhope.co.uk)

A comprehensive directory of mental health support and services local to you based on your postcode.

## PLACE NETWORK

**Online:** [charliewaller.org/place-parent-support](http://charliewaller.org/place-parent-support)

A network of local projects and groups who are either interested in or are offering peer support for parents and carers.

## SAMARITANS

**Call:** 116 123  
**Online:** [samaritans.org](http://samaritans.org)

Confidential and emotional support 24/7 if you're having a difficult time or worried about someone else. Self-help app and webchat available via website.

## YOUNGMINDS PARENTS HELPLINE

**Call:** 0808 802 5544

**Online:** [youngminds.org.uk](http://youngminds.org.uk)

Phone or webchat 9.30am-4pm, Mon-Fri

Parents helpline support with detailed advice, emotional support and signposting about a child or young person up to the age of 25.

# Further resources for parents and carers

## FAMILY MENTAL WEALTH

**Online:** [familymentalwealth.com](http://familymentalwealth.com)

Parent/carer toolkit with short videos to help support children's mental health, along with resources for schools which help students spot the signs of an eating problem.

## NEW MAUDSLEY CARERS

**Online:** [newmaudsleycarers-kent.co.uk](http://newmaudsleycarers-kent.co.uk)

Practical tips and resources including worksheets, videos and podcasts.

## PEACE (PATHWAY FOR EATING DISORDERS AND AUTISM DEVELOPED FROM CLINICAL EXPERIENCE)

**Online:** [peacepathway.org](http://peacepathway.org)

Articles and downloadable resources for autistic people with eating disorders.



## RECOMMENDED BOOKS

Skills based learning for caring for a loved one with an eating disorder: **The New Maudsley Method**. Treasure, J., Smith, G., & Crane, A. (2016).

Caring for a Loved One with an Eating Disorder: **The New Maudsley Skills Based Training Manual**. Langley, J., Todd, G., & Treasure, J. (2019).

How to help someone with an eating disorder – **A practical Handbook**. Pam Macdonald (2021).

Getting better bite by bite: A survival kit for sufferers of bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorders. Treasure, J., Schmidt, U., (2015).

Supporting Autistic People with Eating Disorders: **A guide to adapting treatment and supporting recovery**. Tchanturia, K. (2021)

# Free skills workshops

Workshops for anyone caring for a loved one with an eating disorder.

The Charlie Waller Trust runs a series of online workshops for parents and carers supporting a loved one with an eating disorder. The five-week course consists of a weekly two-hour workshop full of practical tips, real life scenarios and case studies. It is delivered by trained facilitators.

The course is based on the New Maudsley Approach, which aims to lower anxiety and distress in family members. It gives carers communication tools, skills and techniques that help them engage their loved one to improve their self-esteem and develop the resilience to embark on change.

As well as giving carers skills to engage their loved ones, the workshops encourage carers to look after their own physical and psychological needs. Connecting with other carers can be very beneficial too, helping you know you are not alone.

The New Maudsley Approach can help people of all ages, whether they are neurodiverse or neurotypical, and no matter what their eating problem.

*When I joined, I immediately felt I had found a safe place, filled with people who understood everything I said.*



To find out more, please go to:

**Charlie Waller**  
[www.charliewaller.org/what-we-offer/eating-disorder-workshops-for-parents-and-carers](http://www.charliewaller.org/what-we-offer/eating-disorder-workshops-for-parents-and-carers)

Or Scan the QR code:





## Remembering Charlie

Charlie Waller was a strong, funny, popular, good-looking and kind young man, with a close and loving family. To the outside world, he had everything to live for. Yet in 1997, at the age of 28, Charlie took his own life. He was suffering from depression.

In response to this tragedy, his family founded the Charlie Waller Trust, to open up the conversation around depression, and to ensure that young people are able to understand and look after their mental health and to spot the signs in others.

Charlie sits at the heart of our story, our vision and our purpose.

### GET IN TOUCH

hello@charliewaller.org  
01635 869754

### FIND OUT MORE

charliewaller.org

### FOLLOW US



### SUPPORTING US

If you have found this resource useful please consider donating to help us continue our work



Text

To donate £10 Text 'CWT' to 70085  
This costs £10 plus the cost of a standard rate message



Online

Visit [charliewaller.org/donate](https://charliewaller.org/donate)

### The Charlie Waller Trust

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