

Helping and Healing Practices

We face many personal challenges when we live or work with an individual experiencing disordered eating, as does the person themselves. This article has three separate pieces offering strategies for self-development and coping with the situation. As always with personal growth, we can learn from the strategies that others employ. Each of the articles may offer strategies for family members, friends, and an individual suffering from disordered eating. We offer them to you in the hope that they will stimulate you to find additional paths to self-help and support of others.

Practical Advice for Partners of a Person with Disordered Eating... By Someone Who's Been There

**Adapted from an article by Steve Watson, Body-Pride May/June 1993;
Steve lives with his partner who is recovering from bulimia.**

Recovery from disordered eating can be a difficult process; a long, tedious and frustrating process. And *I* wasn't even the one suffering. I would like to share with you some of the things which I have learned (many by trial and error) which have eased the pain for both of us.

- **Patience...** Don't expect the problems associated with an eating disorder to go away immediately, even if they are in recovery. They will experience setbacks along the way and this is normal. Try to be patient; this will ease your frustration at not being able to change things for them. Even setbacks can be used to illustrate their progress, e.g.: they may not be returning to their worst symptoms, or remind them that they have developed new tools to deal constructively with the setback. By remaining calm, they will be able to draw from your tranquility.
- **Hugs...** I found that touching is an important healing tool. Ask them if it's okay to hug them. When the sufferer cannot communicate their feelings or when the person trying to help cannot think of anything to say, a warm, gentle embrace can bridge the wordless canyon and show that you care.
- **Communication...** Try to focus conversations on their emotions, not their behaviours. While they may not always be able to articulate their feelings, the more they are exposed, the sooner the real problems can be dealt with. Don't push them — but don't neglect your own feelings. Share what you are experiencing and be honest. Let them know that you may not know what to do, but that you're there for them.
- **Educate yourself...** Do some research so that you can better understand the issues surrounding eating disorders. There are a numerous resources available online and in your local library which can help shed some light on the topic.

- Contact NEDIC for down-to-earth, practical information and references. Attend any forums or panel discussions on eating disorders, body-image and weight preoccupation. Finally, you may gain some insight by speaking with others who can relate to your personal situation. Support groups can be a friendly environment in which you can openly express your opinions and receive others.
- **Be sensitive and understanding**... Although it is important to express your own frustrations, it is important not to direct anger or criticism about their symptoms at a person suffering from an eating disorder. They are already judgmental of themselves and don't need someone reinforcing those negative voices. They *do* need someone who believes that they are worthy, even if they don't believe it. Remember, be comforting not critical.
 - **Daily reminders**... Remind them of what they do well on a daily basis, because chances are they are more likely to remember what they have done "wrong". Let them know that there's much more to them than their appearance.
 - **Sharing**... Sit down together and discuss practical, concrete ways in which you can support their efforts to change their behaviour (e.g.: going for a walk after meals to distract them from the desire to purge). While it is important that you don't take responsibility for their ability to control their symptoms, you can be an important support. Go at their pace and allow them to structure the process.
 - **Self-care**... It is important to nurture yourself. Make time for yourself in which you engage in activities and hobbies which enrich your life. Time away from your partner and the eating disorder can help you keep perspective, patience and creativity in the relationship.

These tips may not be easy to implement, or seem useful at first, but give them time. Change, even positive change, doesn't happen overnight. A consistently warm, supportive environment goes a long way to encouraging healthy exploration by both partners.

Self-Care and Personal Development

Compiled by Merryl Bear M. Ed. (Psych)

Although it is often difficult, particularly in our culture for women, to justify time and energy directed at our own development, it is an essential part of ongoing personal growth. Here are some strategies for strengthening personal identity.

- **Self-awareness**... Take the time to learn about yourself: Be aware of what your values, preferences and worldviews are. Believe that you are entitled to them and that they are as justified as another person's view and attitudes. In the words of an old African saying, "To know nothing is bad. To learn nothing is worse." – so take the opportunity to learn little things about yourself and your response to the

world about you. This will make it easier to navigate your way through life.
Strategy: e.g.: Write letters to yourself about who you really are, how you think and your attitudes to various issues

- **Differences...** Learn to be comfortable with yourself, and don't try to be what you think other people want you to be – this just makes one feel like a fraud, uncomfortable and untrue to oneself. Trying to become what someone else wants you to be never works: Our beauty lies in the fact that we are *ourselves*. *Strategy: e.g.: Write about how it makes you feel and behave when you do or say something to please someone else all of the time. Now write about how you would like to do/say the same thing in a way which feels “like you”. How does it feel different?*
- **Compassion...** Be gentle with yourself when assessing your attributes. Lives are about learning and growing, not about “perfection”. The whole point about ideals is that they are things to work towards, but are not generally attainable. Accept, cherish and respect yourself in your entirety: body, mind and soul. *Strategy: e.g.: play a sport for fun*
- **Truth...** Be true to yourself. This can be frightening when your beliefs conflict with those of people you love or who have power over you. When we stand up for ourselves we find pride and strength which encourages us to have stronger belief in ourselves. It does the world of good to our self-esteem to feel that we've stuck up for something in which we believe. *Strategy: e.g.: Practice assertiveness in situations that are not threatening, then work towards potentially riskier situations*
- **Self-appraisal...** Don't get stuck in one narrow perception of yourself. We are all complex creatures with a wide range of attributes, abilities and behaviours. Look at yourself from the many angles that you present to the world at different times. Don't be critical of yourself without finding the positive balance. *Strategy: e.g.: When evaluating something that you've done, look at both opportunities for improvement AND aspects of the task that you did well. Just look for opportunities for improvement shows a willingness to learn and grow. But do value what you already do well too.*

Strategies for Engaging With Someone with an Eating Problem

Compiled by Merryl Bear M. Ed. (Psych)

It is often difficult to engage with a family member or friend who is suffering from an eating disorder, or whom you suspect of having one. There are issues about privacy, fear of disclosure, and a sense of helplessness which may make it difficult to broach the subject. Some suggestions to deal with this situation follow.

- Think carefully about the situation and what your concerns are. Be certain that you are not making huge generalizations from a few specific events. Consider the life-stage of the individual you are concerned about and what factors could be playing a part in the problem you perceive.
- Educate yourself about eating disorders. Find out what resources are available for yourself and the individual concerned. Contact NEDIC for information and resources.
- Find or arrange for a time when you can sit down and speak calmly and openly with the person.
- Remember that in all constructive conversations there is a mutual respect for each person's feelings and needs. Try to get an agreement from everyone involved in the discussion that:
 1. the purpose of the discussion is to help family and friends understand what is troubling the person, and how they can be of help
 2. notions of guilt and blame are to be avoided
 3. no-one interrupts another person while they are talking
 4. no-one leave the discussion until it is mutually agreed that it is over
 5. do not focus on appearance and weight as this can be counter-productive. The individual is already overly absorbed with these issues. Focus instead on issues of both emotional and physical health.
- Respect the individual's right to privacy and autonomy as appropriate.
- Where a minor is concerned, exercise responsibility and authoritative wisdom in getting help for the person. Consider the many benefits of family therapy.
- Do not engage in power struggle around food-related behaviour. You are, however, entitled to not be inconvenienced by the person's disordered behaviours. Common household areas and facilities should be kept reasonably clean and available for all.
- Remember that families may be contributing factors but do *not* alone cause eating disorders. You may find support for your own issues through attending forums and support groups. Individual counseling may be helpful.
- Realize the important of patience: The individual can only proceed at the pace which is right for them. Be certain that you are not imposing your goals on the other person.
- Do not take the role of therapist or social worker. These roles are specialized and have different demands than those of family member or friend. Be sincere and respectful in your interactions with the person, but most of all, be a true friend.

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