

Do's and Don'ts: Tips for Family and Friends of Someone with an Eating Disorder

Do:

- Do offer to sit with them while they're eating. Suggest a light physical activity for after meals to keep busy: a puzzle, a game, cards. Reading and TV don't generally work well.
- Do comment on internal or intrinsic qualities of your child instead of outward appearance.
- Do promote exercise as a way to have fun and stay healthy.
- Do engage in physical activities as a family that promote fun and bonding rather than focus on weight loss.
- Do encourage your child to eat foods that are nourishing to promote overall health while still allowing room for fun foods.
- Do model healthy eating habits and good self-care for your child, including healthy thinking around food that allows all food groups in moderation without excluding any foods
- Do encourage your child and your family to do what is best for them regardless of comments and expectations of others.
- Do comment on and praise your child's efforts rather than the end result in order to promote a healthy self-esteem.
- Do encourage everyone in the family to take a "no thank you bite" of every food at meals, regardless of preferences, since tastes can change over time and with exposure.
- Do attempt to have family meals around the table without screens as often as possible in order to promote quality family time, as well as to model healthy eating habits and healthy behaviors around food.
- Do talk about feelings in the home openly and model and encourage healthy coping skills.
- Do practice your own self-care. They are watching to see how you are taking care of yourself - how you are using your healthy voice & how you are balancing your personal/work/home life.
- Do use "I statements." For example: "I am working to stay in my own lane," or "I am working hard not to talk about my or anyone else's weight." "I statements" say "here is what I am working on" and allow you to be a role model. Be aware that if you are not practicing what you are telling them, they will catch on quickly.
- Do establish a "No Fat/No Diet talk zone." This zone should be everywhere! Make a rule in your house that NO ONE can comment on another person's body, even on TV, and that no one can comment about how fat they feel, or that they shouldn't have eaten this or that, etc.

Don't:

- Don't comment on their weight – don't mention loss, gain, anything.
- Don't say "you look healthy" it could be perceived as pertaining to weight gain; instead say, "your coloring looks better", or, "you've been smiling more", or, "you seem to have more energy."
- Don't comment on what they are eating.
- Don't comment on body image, weight, or the physical appearance of your child, yourself, or anyone else (including strangers or celebrities).
- Don't count calories, measure food, or engage in any other diet related activities with your child or for anyone else in the family.
- Don't cut out any food groups.
- Don't label food as "good" or "bad".
- Don't label food as "junk food"; a more appropriate term is "fun foods" with the connotation that sometimes it's okay to eat foods with low nutrient-density for pleasure.
- Don't promote exercise as a weight loss tool for your child or anyone in the family.
- Don't keep magazines around or engage in other media that focuses on image or appearance, promotes a dieting mentality, or encourages weight loss.
- Don't get caught up in what others think of your child or your family.
- Don't change the restaurant you choose to go to at the last minute. They need time to prepare, and a last-minute change doesn't go well.
- Don't ask them what they want to eat. Give them 2-3 options. Decision making and a starving brain do not work well together.
- Don't use logic to explain why they need to eat/not eat. While people with ED are generally very bright and good problem solvers in other areas of their lives, those skills are not present when it comes to ED.
- Do not say "You could die from this." It doesn't work to get them to change their behavior.
- Don't say, "just eat".

What to Say:

- "How are you feeling?" is better than "What did you eat?"
- "What's your number?" Talk with the person about rating their current mood number 1-10. Decide at which number you need to intervene. For example, if 10 is doing fantastic. Then a 4 might mean "Let's go outside for a breath of fresh air" or, "let's go sit and talk." It is often easier to assign a number to how one is feeling rather than choose feeling words. It's better than "You OK?" Or "how are you doing?" It's open ended and she can ask for help without asking for help.
- Take a car ride. Kids and teens talk more freely in the car.
- "Can I give you some feedback?" It prepares her for a potentially difficult conversation. If she says no, respect her decision.
- Just because YOU want to talk, doesn't mean they are ready. The quieter kids are, the more parents talk. Repeating yourself again and again does not help them hear you better. It only makes YOU feel better.

- “People over food.” This is a nice phrase to remember for gatherings. We are getting together to be with people we care about, so let’s not sit near the buffet table, let’s avoid being a part of conversations about food and weight.
- The goal is “progress not perfection”.
- One day at a time, we will do the next right hard thing.
- Breathe.
- We can do this. I am right here beside you.
- How can I help you?