

strive State Carer Support Group

Topic Sheet – February 2022

Carer styles and how we can make a difference

1. Caring for someone with an eating disorder is hugely stressful and exhausting. We've all had times when we feel helpless, angry, resentful, or perhaps guilty about losing control of our emotions. We don't always know how to respond to the range of emotions and behaviours we're facing each day. Our role is crucial in supporting our loved ones to recover however at times we may react in ways which inadvertently result in them retreating further into the eating disorder. It's normal to swing between a huge range of emotions and we're often drawn to "fixing" and "solving".
2. Supporting someone through to recovery requires patience, calm, compassion, consistency, kindness and often, tough love. Finding the balance is extremely difficult and maintaining it in the difficult moments is even more challenging. Sometimes we're too harsh on ourselves and feel like we can't keep going - that's very normal, we're humans too! It's incredibly difficult seeing our loved ones in distress and learning to handle that is one of the toughest things we need to do.
3. For most of us the recovery journey means learning new skills and requires counter intuitive parenting as we're dealing with an illogical brain-based illness. Finding what works takes time and we need to practice and be kind to ourselves while we embed different ways of interacting into our relationships.

It can be helpful to think about our own traits and styles, how we cope and respond to stressful situations. In the depths of the struggle, it can be challenging to reflect and think about the bigger picture, to ask ourselves how we can help our loved one by tweaking our responses. **Just a few minutes a day of being aware of our interactions and changing them, can make a positive difference for the person we're caring for.**

4. The Maudsley Centre in the UK (Janet Treasure) developed a series of animal metaphors to help us, in a light hearted way, identify and understand more about our automatic responses and reactions. It's normal to be all of these animals at different times and the first step to making changes is being aware of it.
 - **The jelly fish**, a lot of emotion, with little control!
 - **The ostrich**, avoidance of emotion! (Head in the sand).
 - **The kangaroo**, tries to make everything right, protects their young at all times (in the pouch)!

- **The rhinoceros**, uses force and logic to win the day (like a bull in a china shop), can make the eating disorder become more entrenched.
- **The terrier** uses persistence (this is often felt as criticism). The eating disorder is like a terrier, it never lets ups!
- **The Dolphin** has a balance of care and control - gently nudging your loved one along the road to recovery, leading the way when you need to, swimming alongside with encouragement or even quietly swimming behind when you have the trust and confidence.
- **The St Bernard**, responds with calmness, warmth and compassion. Always dependable, consistent and reliable. Instilling hope in your loved one that they can change and there is life beyond the eating disorder.

Change is really tough and experimenting with new ways of responding won't initially feel natural or spontaneous. Our loved ones have a bully in their head at all times, and we need to help them to grow strong against the bully, we can't do it for them, but we are there with them all the way.

This Topic Sheet can be found at bit.ly/3gztUJe

References

Treasure, J et al. (2016), *Skills Based Caring for a Loved One with an Eating Disorder, the New Maudsley Method*, 2nd Edition

Shared knowledge and generosity of those with lived experience

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