

strive ARFID 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 as we discuss the different animal metaphors of caring, see if you can see yourself in any of these animals, and make a note of how this may be useful or not so useful in helping with recovery of your loved one. What are your innate personality traits/temperament and how does that influence your response to difficult situations? Do you flip between styles or have too many styles and are not consistent with your approach?

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 carer may not be able to regulate their own emotional responses and as a result it is hard to steer a clear path. There is blame, emotional burnout, distress, the carer needs looking after. A jellyfish needs to find ways to nurture themselves.

- **The ostrich**, avoidance of emotion! (Head in the sand). It's all too chaotic and confusing and much too hard. This type of response may send signals to your loved one that they are uncared for and unloved. Self-esteem saps away and concealment of emotions is an unhelpful example.
- **The kangaroo**, tries to make everything right, protects their young at all times (in the pouch)! Particularly in the case of ARFID, as diagnosis can be quite early in age. A positive kangaroo approach would be to help them to take safe risks and baby steps otherwise they may remain in a childlike cocoon.
- **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. This doesn't allow for confidence without assistance as the rhino uses persuasion, arguments and confrontation convincing instead of motivation and encouragement.
- **The terrier** uses persistence (this is often felt as criticism). The eating disorder is like a terrier, it never lets ups! Nagging is exhausting, saps morale and eventually your loved one tunes out. This is not good enough, try harder. Practice praising efforts would be a more positive approach.
- **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. They have reserves of kindness, gentleness, and love.
- **The herd of elephants**, a collaboration linking trunks and tails to jointly care for their loved one with ARFID. A team of wise others, to make decisions and provide care, friends, family, books, workshops, GPs and specialists and of course our strive support group.

Change is really tough and experimenting with new ways of responding won't initially feel natural or spontaneous.

This Topic Sheet can be found at <https://bit.ly/353Ro78>

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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