

## strive Monthly Carer Support Group

Topic Sheet – May 2022

Learning to Pivot

*Pivoting isn't Plan B, it's part of the process*

Caring for someone with an eating disorder is rarely a linear journey and it's not always possible to see what is around the corner. We often need to shift course and modify or change our approach, many times. Learning to pivot is critical when you're caring for someone with an eating disorder, and we need to have the confidence to pivot, even when the future path is unclear. If we don't pivot in time, we may end up crashing into a wall.

Eating disorders often shift and morph and before we realise what is happening, we can be faced with very different symptoms and behaviours. This is also known as symptom switching. Our loved ones often fight hard and make real progress in their recovery, only to find the eating disorder finds another way to sneak back into their daily routine. The eating disorder will take the front door, the back door, the second story window or drop in by parachute, if that's what it takes to blindside you. If eating disorder symptoms remained the same, it would be much simpler for our loved ones to recover, and easier to be vigilant about relapse.

The essence of symptom switching is replacing one destructive behaviour with another destructive behaviour. The ability of the eating disorder to change costumes or put on a new mask, right under our noses, is a scary, stressful reality of the illness. There are many examples across the different forms of eating disorders: excessive exercise replaced with smaller portion sizes, purging or laxatives. The original food related symptoms replaced with other forms of self-harm such as cutting, excessive alcohol, illegal drugs or medication misuse. It can feel like we're playing a game of "Whack a mole", constantly beating down one behaviour, only for it to be replaced by another.

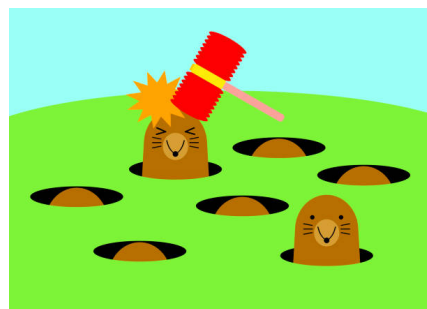


Figure 1 Source: Getty Images

We can't always trust what we're seeing or take it at face value, and it's very tough to live like that. Try to step back and see the bigger picture of what is happening for your loved one, and avoid becoming too obsessed with specific symptoms, at the risk of missing others creeping in. Knowing when to pivot is often based on our instincts and if something feels different to you, you're probably right that something has changed. Go with your gut and try to minimise self-doubt, as it will interfere with your ability to pivot when you need to. The other question we face is whether to discuss changes with our loved one. You are best placed to judge and factors such as their age and the significance of the change, will influence your approach. Trust your instincts!

Pivoting can play out in different ways and making decisions can be agonizingly difficult. We often pivot multiple times a day making small changes to the way we respond to situations without having time to analyse in advance. The more significant decisions may relate to changing the treatment team, modifying school arrangements, increasing the meal plan or supervising your loved one more closely. Our fear of getting it wrong and the unknown consequences can feel like an overwhelming burden at times. Why can't anybody give us definitive solutions?!! We need to continually keep learning and building our knowledge. Be open to new and different ideas, so we feel more equipped and confident to change our approach when necessary. Being part of the **strive** Australia Facebook Group is a wonderful way to learn from the experience of other carers.

Sometimes we also need to pivot for ourselves, for our own self-care and wellbeing. Ask yourself if the approach you're taking is sustainable or do you need to change something so your own health doesn't suffer too greatly. You can't support your loved one if your own cup is empty, so keep looking after yourself, and pivot when you need to.



This Topic Sheet can be found at [bit.ly/3vNQaaE](https://bit.ly/3vNQaaE)



## References

F.E.A.S.T [www.feast-ed.org](http://www.feast-ed.org)

Healthy Place [www.healthyplace.com](http://www.healthyplace.com)

Shared knowledge and generosity of those with lived experience

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