

strive Monthly Carer Support Group

Topic Sheet – June 2022

Managing Difficult Behaviours

Eating disorders bring with them a whole new world of challenging behaviours. Feeling shocked, distressed, angry, overwhelmed, and afraid are all very normal reactions for carers. Remember these behaviours are usually a sign of extreme emotional distress and a response to fear and anxiety.

You may be faced with a range of different behaviours, including: over-exercise, vomiting, bingeing, laxative use, food refusal, self-harm (cutting, medication misuse), withdrawal, dishonesty, running away, alcohol or drug misuse.

Physical and verbal aggression are also common behaviours with eating disorders. Never feel you must tolerate it and be clear with your loved one that it's not ok. Lashing out causes huge shame in your loved one which in turn, fuels the eating disorder. It's torture to watch your loved one so distressed and the anger and vitriol thrown at us is very distressing. At these times try not to engage in fiery arguments and debate with the eating disorder. Leave the room and separate other family members if you need to.

If more than one carer is involved, it can help to tag-team to give each other a break. If the behaviours are extreme, it may be necessary to call for outside assistance such as a mental health crisis team (different in each state), the police or the ambulance service. If you are concerned for your own safety, or the safety of your loved one, don't be afraid to reach out for help.

We can't control the behaviours however setting boundaries and ground rules for our loved one is important. Show them your love and support are unconditional by implementing boundaries without judgement and try to validate what they are experiencing. Sometimes it may not be words, just a hug.

Try to discuss the rules and boundaries with your loved one and if it feels right, involve them in coming up with solutions. Sometimes they just need us to do it for them, as they don't have the strength. Consistency is important and helps your loved one know when you'll step in, and what your intervention will look like. Whilst it might appear like your loved one doesn't like your stance, deep down they are probably relieved you are helping them defy the ED voice. Consistency helps to minimise uncertainty.

It's common to feel helpless and that you're failing if these behaviours occur. It can be incredibly hard to regulate our own emotions when we're feeling hurt, lost, afraid and sometimes angry too. Whilst all these feelings maybe happening on the inside, being calm, compassionate and consistent on the outside is the key.

Try not to beat yourself up and remember the eating disorder mindset is doing whatever it can to strengthen its hold and reinforce feelings of shame and low self-worth in your loved one. The eating disorder tries to push everyone away and create a wedge between those closest to them. Eating disorders flourish if disconnection occurs so we need to be like a brick wall, that cannot be moved.

Remember this is a whole new ballgame and it's very normal to feel inclined to enable or allow eating disorder behaviours. It's not helpful to collude with the eating disorder and whilst it may feel as if you're helping your loved one, you are strengthening the power of the eating disorder.

You learn as you go and get stronger and more confident about what works best for you and your loved one. You also come to know the triggers which allows you to get ahead of the behaviours.

Your connection to your loved one is your most powerful weapon against the eating disorder - trust yourself.

it's my goal to be this calm when things are falling apart



Figure 1 Source: starecat.com

What has worked for you?

Join an upcoming EDFA Education Webinar about managing behaviours

Staying Connected when Emotions Run High, presented by Dr Annmaree Bickerton and Toni Garretty – Thursday 1st September, 8pm AEST

Parenting and Setting Boundaries around an Eating Disorder, presented by Maria Ganci – Thursday 17th November, 8pm AEDT

This Topic Sheet can be found at bit.ly/3tFMh6h

References

Mental Health Foundations bit.ly/3JvjWFJ

Shared knowledge and generosity of those with lived experience

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