

## strive Carer Support Group

Topic Sheet – July 2022

### Siblings and Other Significant Relationships

Eating disorders impact the whole family and other close relationships. Day to day life becomes stressful and tumultuous and the ripple effect to siblings, grandparents, close relatives, and friends, can be significant. We're on the biggest learning curve of our lives and have the needs of many people to juggle. Feeling helpless and guilty about the impact on others is normal, however, remember, it is nobody's fault, and you can't shelter everyone from the eating disorder.

**Siblings** are impacted by eating disorders to varying degrees based on age, personality, family dynamics and other factors. They see the distress and torment cause by the eating disorder and may feel confused, scared, anxious, resentful, and sad. They are often the silent sufferers being reluctant to create any further burden by unloading their own struggles and keep their feelings bottled up inside.

Siblings may try to be perfect and convince themselves they don't need attention or could do the opposite and start acting out in a negative way to gain your attention. They may feel caught between their unwell brother or sister and their parents and be unsure about what to do if they witness harmful behaviours such as hiding food or purging. They should not take on responsibility for helping to "fix" their unwell sibling or act as an intermediary, relaying information between you and your unwell child.

Your unwell child might shut themselves away from or be 'mean' to their siblings. Acknowledge and discuss the impact of these behaviours and try to maintain family boundaries and rules as best as possible. You may need to be more flexible around family rituals such as outings or all eating together if it is unhelpful.

The impact on siblings may not be evident until the worst of the ED storm has passed. They might carry the same ongoing worry as you about whether things will turn bad again. We also know that siblings can have similar traits and there can be a predisposition to eating disorders within families. Keep an eye out for signs and try to keep communication open.

Feeling guilt about not spending as much time with other children and the disruption to their lives is another weight on your shoulders. Try to be kind to yourself and ask family and friends to help out with siblings if possible.

## Some things to try:

- Talk as openly as you can about the situation in an age-appropriate manner (eating disorders thrive in silence and shame)
- Listen to their concerns, acknowledge and validate their fears and distress
- Explain that the eating disorder is like a bully pressuring their sibling to do things they wouldn't otherwise
- Look out for the positives in how your other children are responding and recognise it
- Reach out to a therapist, school counsellor, sibling support group
- Try to maintain their normal activities and routines

## Close relatives and friends of the family

Even when surrounded by friends and family who love us, it's amazing how lonely this journey can feel. If only it were as simple as saying *"my loved one has an eating disorder"*, and everyone would know what to say and do. Finding the emotional energy to explain, justify and respond to unhelpful comments is exhausting. Even some health professionals struggle to find the right words.

Trust your gut about who, when and how to communicate with others, and brace yourself. Help close family and friends understand by sharing information so you don't need to explain it all. Talking openly can alleviate pressure as ongoing secrecy can be hard and eats away at us inside. Most people want to help, they just don't know how. Think of practical and specific things people can do to help such as meals, sleepovers for siblings, transport to activities, shopping etc.

If you're concerned about the impact of particular people or events, do what you need to do, and make decisions that are best for your family. This is not always easy. We feel obligation to others and guilty that things have changed. Attending important gatherings like family birthdays can be impossible and others may struggle to understand. You feel like you're letting everybody down. Accept that some people will never "get it" and you may need to distance yourself for a while.

Relationships often suffer because eating disorders change things (understatement). These relationships can be repaired, and even strengthened going forward. Families and strong friendships are resilient and can weather the worst of storms.



## EDFA Resources (Members Only)

At EDFA we know how tough it can be for siblings and run a monthly support group to provide a safe space for them to have a voice and share emotions and challenges. Carers will need to consent to their attendance. Find access details here [bit.ly/3lixTAA](https://bit.ly/3lixTAA).

**Hugh van Cuylenburg – Resilience for Carers** (Hugh's younger sister had an eating disorder). Access the webinar recording here [bit.ly/3LBTv2i](https://bit.ly/3LBTv2i).

**Bringing a Voice for Siblings Living alongside an Eating Disorder.** Access the webinar recording here [bit.ly/3LBTv2i](https://bit.ly/3LBTv2i).

Other resources:

F.E.A.S.T [bit.ly/3bStjTO](https://bit.ly/3bStjTO)

The Butterfly Foundation [bit.ly/3NPJONV](https://bit.ly/3NPJONV)

Headspace Mental Health For Youth [bit.ly/3NPea2P](https://bit.ly/3NPea2P)

Kids Helpline [bit.ly/3ORiPCS](https://bit.ly/3ORiPCS)

Carer Gateway [bit.ly/3akGX1z](https://bit.ly/3akGX1z)

Eating Disorders from the Inside Out – Laura Hill at TEDx Columbus  
[bit.ly/3liU3ZP](https://bit.ly/3liU3ZP)

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



## References

F.E.A.S.T [bit.ly/3bStjTO](https://bit.ly/3bStjTO)

Shared knowledge and generosity of those with lived experience

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