

What to expect when a young person has an eating disorder

1. Accept that having a young person in your life who is struggling with any form of disordered eating/eating disorder is extremely challenging. Think of this as a marathon rather than a sprint. Set realistic expectations that work for your family. Every family is unique with unique needs.
2. You will encounter denial and probably a great deal of resistance at times. Often people have no or very little insight into their eating disorder and may think you are exaggerating your concerns. This is very 'normal' behaviour when someone is in the midst of an eating disorder.
3. Acknowledge that on this journey there will be ups and downs, detours, and perhaps some stops along the way. Just take each day as it comes and, if there have been setbacks one day, start afresh the next day. It is normal to feel frustrated and upset. Be kind to yourself and acknowledge these are 'normal' feelings given the situation.
4. Challenging a young person's (or anyone for that matter) eating disorder can feel messy. Sometimes it can feel as if things are getting worse before they get better. They can act out with negative behaviours and say mean and hurtful things. Focus on 'this is the eating disorder'. Do not take it personally.
5. Expect a lot of complaining from your loved one. Complaints may be about the therapist, the school counsellor, the doctor, the treatment team, you, siblings, or family members. Again, this is perfectly normal. Do not take it personally and do not give power to these complaints by validating them. Just empathetically listen and divert and move on.
6. Sometimes parents/caregivers say "I don't know this person anymore" or "I cannot believe how they are behaving". It can feel scary and stressful and overwhelming. However, the young person you love is still there. Your love and support is their lifeline. When you feel overwhelmed and the person you love seems to be fighting back at you it can feel very difficult. Remember, dealing with an eating disorder is a marathon. Stay focused on the treatment plan and stay the course.
7. Accept that your loved one may exhibit behaviours you have not witnessed before. If they are normally truthful and honest they can engage in deceitful behaviour. Be patient and compassionate.
8. Be kind and compassionate to yourself. Practise daily self-care. Identify your 'anchors' in your life. Anchors are very unique to each person but can be your partner, spouse, family member, friends, hobbies, exercise, meditation, faith (to name a few). Caring for someone with disordered eating is hard and stressful, so be mindful not to get drawn into the 'chaos' and care well for yourself in spite of the challenges.
9. Accept that on this journey of supporting your young person you will make mistakes and you will question yourself. Do not get caught up in a negative loop about the mistake. This is hard and there is no 'manual' as to how to deal with this. Be kind to yourself and move on and learn from these 'mistakes'.
10. If you have a treatment team in place, speak to them about any concerns you have. They will guide and offer support. Although at times you can feel alone take some time to think and identify your support network and ask for support when you feel the need.
11. The young person's journey to wellness takes time. The world around you may seem different too. But your family has resilience and courage, and you will survive and you will find strength you never knew you had.
12. Finally, recovery is possible. Your loved one can recover from their eating disorder and it is the only way to go from surviving to thriving. It will just take time.



Resources

- **Beat Eating Disorders** is a UK eating disorder charity. www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk
- **Young Minds** is a charity which supports young people with mental health issues. www.youngminds.org.uk
- **The British Nutrition Foundation** makes evidence-based nutrition science available to all. www.nutrition.org.uk