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Eating Disorders and the Holiday Season

By Kristie Wyler, MS, TLLP

With travel, family gatherings, an increased focus on food, meals and cooking, and changes to routines, holidays can be especially difficult for individuals working through an eating disorder. With understanding and support, family and friends can be a powerful tool to help ease the stress for those in recovery.

6 Tips for Supporting Your Loved One

1. Help monitor and navigate comments related to portion sizes

Helpful: Work with family and holiday guests to limit comments regarding how much or how little anyone is eating and give your loved one a supportive space to process any unintentionally hurtful comments made at gatherings. Individuals working through eating disorders may be especially sensitive to perceived judgment on the choices they are making and how much or how little they are eating. Hear an unhelpful comment? No need to publicly confront anyone, but help redirect the conversation, "Yes, everything looks delicious. Jane, I can't wait to hear about your new job!" and later privately ask your loved one if they want time to talk about it.

Not as helpful: Guests and family members talking about how much food is on your plate, their plate, others' plates or comments like "Wow! That's a lot of mashed potatoes!" or "How can you eat all that and look how you do!?" or "Are you sure you shouldn't be eating more?"

*Exception – If your loved one is in the phase of treatment where they need help plating portions, it may be necessary and part of their recovery for a designated person to help guide them on what an appropriate portion looks like for them at this phase.

2. Skip the labels



Helpful: Remembering all food can serve a purpose and it is okay to intuitively eat what your body is craving. Nutrition, fuel, vitamins, and balance are important, but so are mental well-being, peace, trusting your body's signals, enjoyment of food, challenging outdated food rules and reducing stigma. Eating to nourish, to celebrate and to soothe are all healthy when done mindfully and without judgment.

Not as helpful: Adding "healthy" and "unhealthy" or "bad" and "good" labels for food. Labeling and judgment can lead to guilt and shame and can work to cement unhelpful food rules that may lead to disordered eating patterns including restriction, purging, over-exercise and bingeing.

3. Focus less on looks, more on time spent together

Helpful: Reminding loved ones and guests how happy you are to see them, how much you enjoy their company, how their energy lights up a room, how they are a wonderful human being and how much joy they add to your life.

Not as helpful: Comments on your or your loved ones' bodies, weight gain, weight loss, size or labeling people as looking "healthy."

4. Limit talk of "making up" for eating

Helpful: Watching for and helping redirect talk of having to make up for eating or limiting or saving up for desserts, carbs, or any specific food group. Enjoying time together over meals is one of the biggest joys of the holidays. Everyone deserves to eat and enjoy without guilt or shame or feeling like they must "make up" for it.

Not as helpful: Comments like "I saved up all day so I can eat this" or "I have to make sure I head to the gym tomorrow to burn all this off."

5. Help validate their experience and encourage open communication

Helpful: Remind your loved one how important they are to you, that you are here no matter what and that although you may not get everything right, you want to support them. It is difficult to understand the true experience of your loved one working through recovery and you are going to make mistakes. Many individuals with eating disorders may have low self-esteem, "people pleasing" tendencies or feel like their struggles are not that important. By encouraging open communication and giving them space to share their experience, you can help empower them to ask for what they need and see they are worthy of recovery.

Not as helpful: Minimizing their experience ("it's not that big of a deal") or sarcastic comments like "I wish I had an eating disorder!"



6. Know their triggers and how to help

Helpful: When your loved one is ready, help them share their triggers. Some people struggle more at certain times of day, in a specific environment, or around a certain person or group of people. Your loved one may not want to hear or see how many calories are in a meal or hear talk about clothing sizes or working out. One big holiday meal outside of their typical routine meal time or having a large spread of desserts out all day may increase stress and urges for some. Work to understand their triggers and know what helps them (music, playing a game, a walk outside, breathing exercises, time to process away from the crowd) when they are experiencing urges.

Not as helpful: Expecting your loved one to work through stressful times on their own.

When a loved one is in recovery it may feel like you have to walk on eggshells around them, protect them and not make any mistakes. Recovery may feel overwhelming, sometimes impossible, and that's okay. You are not alone. You will probably misspeak. A relative or guest will probably make an unhelpful comment. Talk about it. Encourage your loved one to discuss events and urges with their therapist and dietitian. Always remind them how important they are and how you are here for them, especially when it gets difficult. Tell them you will keep trying and you want to know what they need. Remind them they are worth it, and you believe in them, even when they don't believe in themselves.

Have a tip for other ways to help your loved one through the holiday season, or want to share what was helpful for you? We would love to hear from you!