

WHEN YOUR CHILD OR LOVED ONE HAS AN EATING DISORDER

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Eating disorders are not only conditions that affect individuals suffering from them, they also greatly affect the families and loved ones who surround these individuals in their daily lives. I have had the privilege of working in the field of eating disorders for many years and am honored to participate in the recovery process of many families. This introductory article is meant to highlight some important information geared towards the families who so often suffer in silence.

- You are not alone: 1 to 3 percent of the population meet the full criteria of either Anorexia Nervosa or of Bulimia Nervosa. An even greater number of individuals suffer from disordered eating; a general term utilized to define a condition where people obsess over food, body composition, thinness, and rigid nutrition and exercise. Unfortunately many people are never diagnosed properly and thus never get proper treatment and in sum are somewhat validated to pursue such unhealthy behaviors. Given the fact that disordered eating is so prevalent, the families and loved ones affected by this condition are enormously widespread, yet so often anonymous and alone in their own suffering.
- You are not to blame: Some correlations can be found that represent parents of eating disorder sufferers: too much emphasis on performance and achievement, enmeshment and lack of boundaries or limit setting skills, difficulty to express anger, parent's own body and weight dissatisfaction or eating disorder, history of substance abuse or other psychiatric conditions. That being said, children do not come with instruction books and parents and loved ones raise their children with the best of intentions. Eating disorders are caused by a multitude of physiological and genetic factors, psychological factors, and social and societal factors. Parents need not blame themselves. On the other hand, parents need to be open minded enough to understand the difficulties within their own family system and more importantly, be open to working on these difficulties no matter how hard it may be.
- Tips on how to communicate with your loved ones: Although there are a multitude of tips and guidelines that can be of help, it is important to know that communicating with someone at any stage of an eating disorder is quite difficult regardless of how diplomatic one may be. The following notions are known to be helpful:
 - *Timing is everything.* Choose a moment when all parties are calm and when the situation is not already escalated. Do not have serious conversations around mealtime or over food.
 - *Use "I" statements.* Talk about your own experience. Placing the blame will only make things worse.
 - *Be a united front.* Families and loved one's need to stick together. No matter your differences behind closed doors, communicate the same message of health and recovery when it comes to the eating disorder.

- *Distinguish the healthy self and the eating disorder self.* Do not tell your loved ones that you do not trust *them*, instead tell them that you do not trust their *eating disorder*.
 - *It's not about food.* Debating over food and nutrition is a losing battle. Instead talk about your concern for their physical and emotional health due to the behavioral changes you have observed.
 - *Be informed.* Do your own reading, preparing, reaching out, and sharing. An informed communicator is always better equipped and more effective than one who is not.
 - *Be yourself.* Authenticity is so important. Showing your emotions and genuine concern without censorship is often the most powerful tool.
- When to confront: Addressing the disordered eating behaviors is often times very difficult, mostly because so often they are not perceived as being problematic to the person in question. It is however crucial that concerned family members and loved ones communicate their message no matter how it is received. Rarely are families wrong in their suspicion that something is not right. Loved ones need to hear that concern even though they are often not ready to do anything about it at that point and time. Confrontations need to occur especially when there is concern of considerable health risks (i.e.: rapid and or considerable weight loss, great dysfunction in daily living, fainting, suicidal ideations...). Families may need to enlist professionals to help them intervene when met with considerable resistance.
 - Where to draw the line – How to set limits: No matter how much one is willing to help and endure, there comes a time when family members and loved ones need to recognize their own limits. In order to have a life beyond the eating disorder, these limits need to be set to protect your own well-being and sanity. It is okay to say no. It's okay if not necessary to continue to work. It's okay to go on vacation. It's okay to expect all individuals under your roof to follow house rules (given that they are adapted if they involve food). It's okay to celebrate holidays and special occasions. And it is especially okay to make sure that your own needs are met.
 - What to say and how to act with siblings: Siblings are people too. They are just as much a part of the family as the individual with the eating disorder. Chances are that they are aware that something is wrong. Keep them in the loop (let the person with the eating disorder know when and how you are communicating to his or her siblings. Ask them if they would like to participate in that discussion. In any event however, let them know that you will respect their need for privacy when it comes to unnecessary details.) Recognize that siblings are affected by the eating disorder as well. As much as you can, continue to be emotionally and physically available to them. Participate in activities with them. Continue to hold them accountable for their behaviors just as you did before. Most importantly do not make them feel guilty for having their own needs as well.
 - How to take care of yourselves: Take a moment and list activities, people, things that normally fill your soul. Make sure you are continuing to engage in these activities and especially with these people even though your loved one is in distress. Spend some

intimate time with your spouse, go out to dinner with friends, take some time for yourself and get a massage, continue to participate in that yoga class that helps you clear your mind. Seek professional help or a support group to help you deal with the sadness, frustration, confusion, and feelings of powerlessness. Remember, your emotional and physical health is of utmost importance. You need your strength to help you through this difficult journey.

- Books and resources: Take note of the enclosure listing valuable books and resources. They have been known to help in times of distress.

In closing, recognize that recovery is a long-term unpredictable process with its ups and downs. It is normal to at times fear that such a recovery almost seems unattainable. In those moments, I ask you to recall the many stories of hope and recovery that we professionals see in our offices every day. The key is not to give up. May that day come for you and for your family sooner than later. Wishing you strength and healing as you continue on with your journey.

Recommended Readings

POMERLEAU, Guy, « Anorexie et Boulimie, Comprendre pour Agir », Gaëtan Morin Éditeur, 2001.

DOUGLAS Stone, **PATTON** Bruce and **HEEN** Sheila, « Difficult Conversations », Penguin Books, 1999.

SIEGEL Michelle, Ph.D, **BRISMAN** Judith, Ph.D and **WEINSHEL** Margot, Ph.D, « Surviving an Eating Disorder: Strategies for family and friends », Harper Perennial, 1997.

HERRIN Marcia, Ed.D, M.P.H., R.D. and **MATSUMOTO** Nancy, « The Parents Guide to Childhood Eating Disorders », Gürze Books, 2002.

LEMOINE Tania, MSSW, LCSW, « Troubles Alimentaires, Guide Parents & Proches : Comment venir en aide aux personnes souffrant de troubles alimentaires », Éditions de L'Homme, à venir, 2006.

Resources for Families and Loved Ones

ANAB: Open support group for families and loved ones.
Contact: Laila Gravel and Lucie Sarazin, group facilitators (514) 630-0907

Argyle Institute of Human Relations: Family therapy.
Contact: (514) 931-5629

BACA Eating Disorders Clinic: Closed psycho-educational and support group, family coaching, and family therapy for families and loved ones.
Contact: Tania Lemoine, Program Director (514) 522-9023

Douglas Hospital, Eating Disorders Unit: Group and family therapy for families and loved ones.
Contact: Dorita Schemie, Senior Social Worker (514) 761-6131

La Ligne Parents: Hotline for parents in need of support (800) 361-5085

Montreal Children's Hospital, Adolescent Eating Disorder Unit: Family therapy
Contact: Anne-Marie Martinez, Senior Social Worker (514) 412-4481