

# Mealtime Support

## Information for parents and carers

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This is a short guide to help parents/carers support their loved one in the task of re-establishing regular eating. This is not an easy task, but it is an essential aspect of their care and treatment. This resource is a summary of the key points to consider, you may wish to access more detailed information by accessing this information leaflet:

### Supporting a Young Person with a restricted eating disorder

[https://policyonline.nhslothian.scot/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Supporting\\_a\\_young\\_person\\_with\\_a\\_restricted\\_eating\\_disorder.pdf](https://policyonline.nhslothian.scot/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Supporting_a_young_person_with_a_restricted_eating_disorder.pdf)



Other parents and carers have found **Eva Musby's videos** helpful:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=2O9nZAWCkLc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2O9nZAWCkLc)



### Points to note before a meal or snack

1. An eating disorder creates significant anxiety and distress for your loved one, particularly during meal and snack times. It is helpful to plan ahead, be organised and be consistent in your approach.
2. Discourage your loved one from checking food labels, weighing out foods or having access to calorie tracking apps. This behaviour only strengthens the eating disorders hold. Foods should not be low-fat or diet versions unless agreed with the dietician. Normal wholesome foods are encouraged. Ideally you are wanting your loved one to eat the same food as the rest of the family or their peers, as they did before they became unwell.
3. Provide 3 regular meals, that is breakfast, midday lunch and an evening meal and 3 snacks in between these meals. Never leave more than 3 hours without eating. Even if there has been a binge episode, it is important to continue with the expectation of regular meal and snack times.
4. Plan how you will provide support for your loved one at each meal and snack. Avoid allowing them to eat alone or in their room.
5. Considerations around their environment, setting clear expectations of where they will sit, who will be sitting with them and ideally include them in your family mealtimes.
6. Ask your loved one what is helpful or not helpful for you to say or do during times when they are eating.

### Points to note during the meal

1. Those supporting mealtimes can be good role models. By modelling normal eating behaviour, you will encourage your loved one to do the same.
2. It is best to keep mealtimes as relaxed as possible. To do this, avoid discussing feelings, food related topics, portion sizes or negotiating at mealtimes.
3. Utilise distraction with light-hearted conversations and encourage others to be included in these conversations too. Continue to prompt by firmly encouraging your loved one with positive comments, such as “you can do this”, “I am here for you, you are safe” or “keep going”.
4. Try to stay calm throughout the meal or snack. It is important to find a balance between being understanding and remaining firm.
5. It might be helpful to set reasonable timeframes around meals and snacks. For example, 30 minutes for meals and 15 minutes for snacks. Find what works for you, as some young people need a little longer than this. However, it is important to ensure there is an end point and ensure you are consistent in implementing this.

### Points to note after meal or snack

1. After eating, your loved one will require support as they may be feeling extremely anxious and guilty. It is important to continue to support them at this time, again, utilising distraction like card games, crafts, going for a drive or watching a programme together.
2. There may be physical discomfort experienced around fullness. This is a normal process as the body adapts to regular eating. Encourage distraction and utilise self-soothing strategies like a hot water bottle or using their favourite blanket and reassuring them that it will pass.
3. It is helpful to avoid the use of the toilet after eating, so encourage your young person to use the toilet prior to meals and snacks.

It is also essential to remain alert to and direct away from eating disordered driven behaviours, for example:

- Hiding food in clothing or up sleeves
- Smearing food on body/hair/clothes
- Sticking food under table or chair
- Spreading food around the plate or up to the edge
- Feeding food to a pet
- Crumbing food items and spreading over the plate/table
- Pretending to cough into a tissue while spitting out food
- Using a straw instead of drinking from a cup
- Segregating food e.g. peeling apart lasagne
- Picking out solids from sauces
- Excessive drinking
- Only using specific cutlery/plates. For example a very small/large bowl.

