



MEAL SUPPORT

STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT
THOSE RECOVERING FROM
AN EATING DISORDER

SARAH-LOUISE MCKENZIE

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Meal support: strategies to support those recovering from an eating disorder



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FOREWORD



If you are reading this booklet, it is likely that you or someone you care about has been affected by eating issues and you are seeking guidance in assisting them, or yourself, to restore healthy eating behaviours.

If you have been struggling with eating issues, you may be ambivalent about RECOVERY or have realized that you cannot do it on your own, which is partly why Sarah created this booklet...because RECOVERY is possible.... but only with plenty of support. Paradoxically accepting support is one of the greatest challenges one faces in overcoming eating issues and yet it can also be one of the most rewarding. As you come to find freedom in the process of letting go of the old behaviours and reaching out to another, you will find hope.

Whether you are the support person or the person contemplating recovery, this booklet contains a wealth of wisdom, practical tools, and guidelines that can aid you in preparing for and taking steps to restore normal eating habits. Like anything worth doing, re-establishing natural eating functions takes practice, patience and commitment and there are bound to be times you will feel like quitting. Along with practice, supporting yourself or someone on this path requires a particular type of attitude or approach...one that is both strong and flexible, loving and firm, and above all, one that is compassionate and willing to keep going...especially when the going gets tough!

Sarah is someone who knows only too well the despair and hopelessness that can accompany the journey of RECOVERY and has learned the value of having a supportive team and cultivating a compassionate attitude towards herself. Sarah and her support team have rigorously applied these attitudes in the journey of developing the material for this booklet and are excited to see it come to fruition.

I would like to thank Sarah for inviting me to write this forward and congratulate her in having the courage to turn her frustration and desperation into a vision of a resource that could give others hope and in making that vision into a reality. I am confident this will not be the last we hear from Sarah as she continues to explore her creativity and inspire others on the path of RECOVERY.

I trust that you will discover through reading this booklet, the extraordinary gift that can come from supporting another to do what they cannot yet do for themselves, and the freedom and joy that awaits us when we take the risk to step beyond our comfort, breathe into our fear and receive support from another.

May you discover the possibility of RECOVERY within the power of connection.

Alison Lee

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Founder of Heartwork & Creator of the Isis Mentor Program (2013)





PREFACE



I have spent considerable time receiving inpatient treatment for Anorexia Nervosa and EDNOS (Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified). The transition from the intensive supervision and support of hospital, to the comparatively minimal support in the community, is extremely challenging and frequently resulted in being readmitted within a few weeks. As an outpatient, I needed daily meal support to strengthen recovery and reduce the risk of relapse, but such a program was inaccessible. My family, partner, friends, and treating team were willing to assist in any way they could, but the only meal support guidelines that existed were rigid inpatient ones and the Maudsley Approach, which is designed for adolescents. Both of these were inappropriate for adults desiring support in the community and in their own homes. Time and again, I was told that what I needed and the resources that would be so beneficial, just didn't exist.

I then began instituting my own meal support program, organising to eat at least one meal a day with a support person (my therapist, case manager/psychologist, mentor, partner, parents, friends, or at group therapy). It was challenging and required navigating new waters, but in collaboration, we began to increase my regularity and adequacy of nutrition and take steps towards recovery. Through trial and error, we discovered what did and didn't work, and I became more skilled in identifying and communicating to my support people what I needed.

Amanda Deardon (coordinator of Isis – the Eating Issues Centre Inc) approached me with 'Hall, D, Leichner, P, Calderon, R & Caufield, S 2004, *An introduction to effective meal support: a guide for family and friends*, Children's & Women's Health Centre of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada', and asked if I'd be interested in adapting the booklet, which had been designed for working with children and adolescents, to reflect the dynamics of working with adults. Initially, I designed a single page flyer with basic principles that I discovered had worked for me. As I sought feedback from others, the project grew into a booklet of its own. I sought to create something that reflected the support needs across the continuum of eating disorders and captured those things which my support people wish they had known from the onset of my eating disorder.

What you hold in your hands today is a result of the feedback, input, and collaboration of individuals recovering from eating disorders, the people who support them, clinical professionals, and eating disorder therapists.



DURING THE MEAL



When a person struggling with an eating disorder sits down to eat, she may be overwhelmed with intrusive negative and fearful thoughts. She may be strategising what to eat first, assessing the number of calories on the plate, considering how this food is going to impact her body, or wondering how she is going to get through the meal. She may become overwhelmed by the food in front of her and shut down socially and emotionally. These are some strategies that may assist in creating a positive atmosphere that focuses on the social aspects of meals:

- Eat together. Don't 'monitor' or 'watch' the person eating. This can increase feelings of self-consciousness, making eating more difficult.
- Avoid comparisons.
- _____

Distraction

- Try keeping conversation light, non-emotional and avoid topics such as food, numbers, calories, dieting, sensitive therapy issues, weight or weight-related issues, appearance, exercising, violent current events, hospital, or previously unresolved issues.
- Plan conversation topics in advance that help distract the individual from worrying and focusing only on the food in front of her. Ideas include: movies they like, places they'd like to travel to, friends, future career goals, sports, etc.
- Plan activities that can be engaged with during the meal that aid in distraction, such as:
 - Word jumbles
 - Crossword puzzles
 - Trivia cards
 - Mind games
 - Board games
- Vary the distractions and be creative.
- Promote relaxation techniques.
- _____
- _____

Coaching and Reassurance

- Encourage and reassure, helping individuals to cope with anxiety and fears.
- Affirm the psychological and physical benefits of nourishment.
- Validate the individual's struggle by acknowledging how physically and emotionally challenging it is.
- If the individual is unable to complete the meal, find out why and discuss ways to make completion possible the next time, setting achievable goals.
- Be flexible and reduce all-or-nothing thinking/behaviours.
- _____
- _____
- _____

Useful Phrases

- "Your body really needs the fuel". ^
- "This is your medicine". ^
- "Take a few minutes to collect yourself, then start again. Try some deep breathing". ^
- "You must be angry and scared, but you deserve to eat. You deserve to get better". ^
- "I see you are struggling. Right now it is important that you get through the meal. Let's take some time afterwards to talk about it". ^
- "Yes, you feel full. That's normal but scary for you at the same time. Over time if you eat more regularly you will not feel so uncomfortable".*
- "I understand how difficult this must be. You're doing well".
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

* Auckland Eating Disorder Service 2008, *Meal Support*, Auckland District Health Board, Auckland, New Zealand.

^ Leichner, M, Standish, K & Leichner, P 2005, 'Strategies for supporting youth with eating disorders when intensive treatment is needed', *BC Medical Journal*, vol. 47, no. 1, pp. 49-55.

Addressing Disordered Eating Behaviours

Sometimes individuals resort to disordered eating behaviours to deal with anxiety that arises surrounding eating. They may not even be aware of their actions. Some may find it beneficial for the support person to highlight these behaviours and gently redirect their focus or movement, whereas others may find this too confronting and shameful. Identify and discuss together what is and isn't appropriate for this stage of recovery.

- I would prefer that you didn't bring attention to my disordered eating behaviours at this stage.
- I would like you to bring attention to behaviours that are inconsistent with 'normal' eating patterns in a non-confrontational, nurturing and supportive tone.

Some of the habits/behaviours I would like you to bring attention to are:

- Excessive use of salt/sugar/spices/condiments
- Cutting or tearing food into small pieces
- Frequently shifting the food around the plate
- Eating all food without utensils
- Only using a teaspoon
- Mixing foods to make unusual concoctions
- Mashing and combining all foods
- Hiding food
- Eating in small bites
- Eating each food group before moving on to the next
- Eating the easiest foods first and saving the most dense foods for last
- Eating slowly or stalling
- Eating too quickly
- Leaving food on the plate
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Questions to Ponder

⌘ What can family and friends say/do during the meal that helps with eating?

⌘ What are things that family and friends may say/do that make eating more difficult? _____

⌘ What are the signs to others that indicate that eating is going okay? _____

⌘ When eating is going well, my family/friends can support me by _____

⌘ What are the signs that indicate that eating is a struggle? _____

⌘ When eating is a struggle, my family/friends can support me by _____

