



## 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.
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### ***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.
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## 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.
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## 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".
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\* 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
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## Questions to Ponder

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

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

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

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

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

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

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