




Helping a loved one navigate meals and social events

A resource for families and friends supporting
a loved one with an eating disorder.






“I noticed my loved one is very uncomfortable about social events involving food... How can I help?”

Food is treated as very important in many cultures, families, and communities, and can often be a key part of social events. This can often be a cause of stress to those with an eating disorder, and it can be hard to understand at first.

This SWEDA resource shares tips you can use to help your loved one navigate these stressful situations.

Firstly, it is helpful to learn more about eating disorders so that you can understand what may be going on for your loved one in these situations. [You can find out more about common eating disorders here.](#)



Check in together before a meal

It can be useful to speak to your loved one about what triggers may come up for them – be that conversation topics, family traditions around food, or how food is served – and how best to address them. Remember to listen without judgement and acknowledge their concerns, even if they seem irrational to you.

Uncertainty can be very anxiety inducing for people with eating disorders, so try to talk beforehand about what they can expect the meal to be like. Find out what foods will be provided, speak to them about this, and understand what they are and are not willing to try

While acknowledging their worries, you can also encourage them to name what is positive for them about social events. For example, it can enable them to spend quality time with loved ones and take a break from the stresses of everyday life.



Serving food

It may be helpful to serve your loved one's meal away from the table, so they do not worry about portion size. Be reasonable with how much you offer them, and try to be empathetic that they may not be able to finish their plate every time.

In situations where your loved one may have to serve their own plate, such as a buffet, it can be helpful to approach the table with them so they can copy your choices and portion size, as people with eating disorders can sometimes struggle to know how much they are meant to be eating.





During the meal

Remember that this is a very difficult situation for them and it can bring up a lot of emotions. Show compassion for their concerns. Sometimes people with eating disorders can get very quiet while eating due to the anxiety they are experiencing. It is important to give them their space and time so you do not add to their stress.

- Try to bring your loved one's attention away from the plate of food by initiating conversation or putting on some music. This will help decrease their anxiety around the meal.
- Try not to closely watch them eating or comment on any of their habits.
- If there are family customs or rituals, assure your loved one that they don't need to participate if they are going to find it difficult.
- If there are many people around, try to offer subtle support. See if they need someone to talk to and offer to go somewhere private if you can see they are struggling.
- Remember to give them grace and accept that they may not be able to finish a meal every time. Acknowledge their progress rather than expecting a constant upward trajectory.



Things to be mindful of:

Triggering topics

Conversations around weight, shape or diets, common themes around the dinner table, can be distressing and anxiety inducing. Avoid assigning any moral value to food, such as saying anything is “good” or “bad”. It can be helpful to understand and question our inherited cultural views about food, body weight, and exercise.

Giving them space

Many people try to help by encouraging their loved ones to eat more, or to eat ‘fear foods’ such as chocolate. This can quickly backfire and lead to anxiety if they are not ready. Try to let your loved one take the lead and gently nudge them without being forceful, and accept if they say they are not ready for it right now.

Eating in front of others


Having to eat in front of lots of people can be very stressful. Try to take the focus away from the meal by bringing in other topics of conversation if you can.

Comments on how they look

Mentioning how ‘well’ the person with an eating disorder looks while they are recovering can sometimes be interpreted negatively. Avoid making any comments about their physical appearance or eating habits. Instead, focus on how they seem happier.

Allowing plenty of time

Often, people in recovery may take a long time to finish eating due to their anxiety. Allow them the time to do so without putting any pressure. Sitting with them while they finish their meal can make a very big difference.



After a meal

It is normal to want to praise your loved one after a meal, but for some this may lead to some shame and guilt. Others like their efforts to be acknowledged and are pleased that loved ones see their achievement. Generally, praise is accepted if it acknowledges the challenge that has been faced, for example: “I could see that was hard for you, well done.”

Try to plan something to distract them after the meal, such as a board game, jigsaw or film. Try to take the conversation away from the meal that was just had.

Everyone is different and unique. What might work for one person might not work for another. Take the time to communicate with your loved one and find out what works and doesn't work for them.

