

S is for Support

Many of the features of eating disorders--such as the intense drive to be thin, the irrational fear of fat, and the belief that one's weight and shape are central to one's self-concept—are common in our society.^{1,2} Moreover, our busy lives and the aspects of secrecy, shame, and fierce pride in weight loss that characterize most eating disorders conspire together to make it hard to see changes and make sense of them.³ By the time a disorder is recognized and acknowledged by caring people, the situation is usually out of control and serious.⁴

This painful acknowledgement is a reminder that the process of developing a disorder, identifying it as a disorder, making a commitment to finding treatment, finding good care, and participating in treatment, recovery, relapse, and continued recovery is just that—a process. And it is typically a long and complicated process, even for those with intellectual, financial, and social resources.^{4,5,6}

This means that **loved ones, as well as the person suffering from the eating disorder, need and deserve support**. There are various forms of support available to most families. These include:

- **Family members re-prioritizing their time and commitments so as to reaffirm their love and care for each other.**
- **Family members learning how to share their problems in confidential and productive ways** with close friends, as well as with others who may be in a position to provide support, such as employers and clergy.
- **Family members attending free support groups.** These groups are designed to provide empathy, respect, information, advice, and opportunities to learn from other families. Knowing that you're not alone in your struggle, knowing that you have some place where people understand and encourage your strong emotions, and knowing that there is real hope are all powerful incentives to stick with the long process of treatment and recovery.

Click here for more information about The Center for Balanced Living's free support groups for families and friends

<http://www.centerforeatingdisorders.org/main/index.php?page=44&module=116>

IMPORTANT NOTE: A support group may, at times, provide resources that feel therapeutic. However, a support group is designed to be an adjunct to therapy, and not to be group therapy.

- **Family therapy and individual therapy.** In some instances, various factors, including the severity of the loved one's eating disorder, make it nearly impossible for family members to support each other effectively and to find and make use of other forms of support. It is not uncommon for family members to be depressed or struggling with their own anxieties and other issues. In such instances, family members may benefit from individual therapy and/or family therapy.^{4,7} Eating disorders treatment is best served through a multidimensional approach.^{8,9,10} At The Center for Balanced Living family members are expected to be a part of the treatment process when the loved one is under 18 years of age, and actively encouraged to be a part of family or couples therapy when the loved one is an adult.

Again—the key issue is not “fixing people who are at fault.” The emphasis is on strengthening individuals and the family so that they make take better care of themselves and their loved one.

¹ Gordon, R. (2000). *Eating disorders: Anatomy of a social epidemic* (2nd edition). Malden, MA: Blackwell.

² Levine, M. P., & Smolak, L. (2006). *The prevention of eating problems and eating disorders: Theory, research, and practice*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

³ Smolak, L., & Levine, M. P. (2007). Recognizing & preventing adolescent eating disorders and muscularity Problems. *The Prevention Researcher*, 14(3; September), 15-17.

⁴ Herrin, M., & Matsumoto, N. (2007). *The parent's guide to eating disorders: Supporting self-esteem, healthy eating, & positive body image at home* (2nd ed.). Carlsbad, CA: Gürze.

⁵ Natenshon, A. H. (1999). *When your child has an eating disorder: A step-by-step workbook for parents and other caregivers*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

⁶ National Eating Disorders Association [NEDA] website = www.nationaleatingdisorders.org

⁷ Lock, J., & Le Grange, D. (2005). *Help your teen beat an eating disorder*. New York: Guilford.

⁸ Andersen, A. E. (1985). *Practical comprehensive treatment of anorexia nervosa and bulimia*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University.

⁹ Health Education Center, & Eating Disorders Institute. (1999). *“How did this happen?” A practical guide to understanding disorders—for teachers, parents and coaches*. Minneapolis, MN: Institute for Research and Education, HealthSystem Minnesota.

¹⁰ Katzman & Pinhas. (2005). *Help for Eating Disorders: A Parent's Guide to Symptoms, Causes and Treatments*. Toronto: Robert Rose Incorporated.