

A Guide for Family Members and Friends

Here are some dos and don'ts for family members and friends. It is important to

- **Educate yourself about bulimia.** Bulimia develops and is maintained by a combination of factors, and bulimic symptoms can serve as a very effective coping mechanism. Once the bulimic cycle is activated, it is very difficult to break. Your loved one cannot “snap out of it” or use will power to overcome bulimia.
- **Compliment and reinforce characteristics and interests of than weight and appearance.** Part of recovery for your loved one is to separate his or her self-esteem from appearance. You can help by commenting on strengths, abilities, and interests that are not related to appearance, weight, or shape.
- **Share activities that don't raise concerns about weight and shape.** This can also help your loved one to learn to obtain self-worth from areas not related to weight and shape, and at the same time provide a distraction from urges to have symptoms.
- **Express your concerns, and communicate directly and openly.** Don't beat around the bush. If you have concerns, it is good to express them directly. This models good communication for your loved one and also helps you to avoid sending indirect and confusing messages.
- **Offer your support by being available and listening.** Use your listening skills and allow your loved one to talk about what is on his or her mind. Try not to offer advice or to fix things.
- **Be open to letting your loved one talk about his or her feelings.** Part of your loved one's recovery from bulimia includes identifying and expressing feelings.
- **Allow your loved one to be independent and in charge of his or her own recovery.** It is important that your loved one start to build up his or her own level of confidence, in order to recover from bulimia. To support his process, you will need to keep a balance between offering support and allowing your loved one to accomplish tasks and make decisions on his or her own.
- **Realize that it is best for your loved one to go at his or her own pace and make his or her own decisions in terms of eating and recovery.** If your loved one feels coerced, your attempts to help could backfire.
- **Examine your own beliefs about food, weight, and shape.** Your beliefs about eating, your own weight, or other people's weight may be contrary to the approach your loved one needs. It is helpful to examine your beliefs and to be aware of any direct or indirect messages that you might be sending.
- **Treat your loved one like any other family member or friend.** If you give your loved on special status because of the eating disorder, you may inadvertently reinforce the bulimia.
- **Encourage professional help.** Or, if your loved one has decided to discuss his or her problems outside the family, support this decision.

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- **Be aware of your own and other family members' needs.** Bulimia can take a serious toll on a family or a friendship. Try to take care of yourself and find ways of obtaining support for yourself.
- **Be patient.** Recovery may take some time. Having symptoms slips after a symptom-free period is not unusual and does not mean your loved one is giving up or is back to square one.

The following is a list of don'ts.

- **Don't comment on weight, shape, or appearance.** Any comment that you make about weight, shape, or appearance will probably be interpreted negatively. It also sends the message that your loved one's appearance or body size is important to you. Avoid making comments even if your loved one asks for your opinion. In this case, you might want to refer to this guideline, and state that you don't want to go there because you think that it is not in his or her best interest.
- **Don't ignore the problem.** Bulimia is a complex problem that usually doesn't go away on its own. Your loved one will benefit from your understanding and support.
- **Don't blame yourself or your loved one for the eating disorder.** Blaming will not help the situation and will likely leave you feeling guilty or angry.
- **Don't demand change.** If it were easy to change and recover from bulimia, then your loved one would have already done so. Your loved one has a difficult battle ahead and can benefit from your patience.
- **Don't get involved in a power struggle.** This is the last place you want to be. This will give the eating disorder strength and power. If you find that you are involved in a discussion or a dynamic where your loved one is arguing in favor of the eating disorder and you are arguing the other side, disengage and reevaluate.
- **Don't take control or police eating or symptoms.** This may lead your loved one to feel out of control.
- **Don't rescue your loved one.** This can lead to feelings of ineffectiveness, incompetence, and dependence.
- **Don't give the eating disorder special status.** This type of attention can reinforce the eating disorder and make it difficult for your loved one to recover.
- **Don't take on the role of a therapist.** Know your limits and recognize your own needs.

Note: There may be exceptions to these guidelines based on the seriousness of your loved one's condition and his or her age. For example, sometimes it is necessary to take control or to rescue your loved one if their life is in danger or they are very young.