

Eating Disorders and Your Sibling

The information in this article is by no means intended as a substitute for medical advice from a qualified health practitioner. It does not recommend any one treatment, therapy or medication. Please seek medical advice as different medications suit different individuals.

Siblings have unique relationships with each other and when one of your siblings becomes ill, particularly with an eating disorder, it can become quite a confusing time. As a sibling of someone with an eating disorder you may experience a range of feelings and thoughts.

Remember you are not alone. There are however, ways in which you can help your sibling during this difficult time in their lives and this fact sheet aims to help you cope and help you support your sibling.

Siblings can hold the potential to become their ill sibling's greatest asset and support.

Emotions & Feelings of Siblings

Siblings may feel a range of different emotions at different times. Often siblings may experience some or all of the emotions/feelings listed below:

Grief & Sadness

- Loss of "old" sibling and your relationship with them
- Loss of former family life
- Sad and upset at seeing their sibling and family in such distress
- Not understanding why this has happened

Anger

- Due to sibling taking priority
- Perceiving their sibling to be the cause of such pain and hurt in the family - "It's her fault that Mum's so stressed at the moment"
- Because family routines and home environment have been disrupted and changed by sibling with the eating disorder

Neglect and Isolation

- So much time and energy is devoted to the needs of the ill sibling
- People often talking to you about your sick sibling and not about your everyday life or how you're coping with it all.

Stress

- Not wanting to talk about feelings etc with parents in case of further burden. (Ball, 1995)

Top 10 Tips for Siblings of Someone with an Eating Disorder

Here are some tips and things to think about in how you can support your sibling but also take care of yourself:

1. **Accept** that your sibling's illness is not your fault
2. **Education** – learn about the type of eating disorder your sibling has, in particular the behavioural changes that they might experience. It is better to know the facts of the illness and have a good understanding of what the coming weeks and months may be like. Information can be obtained from the Eating Disorders Foundation of Victoria, your local GP or Community Health Centre.
3. **Know** that your brother/sister is very distressed and confused and even though they might not say or show it, they have not stopped caring about you.
4. **Realise** that it is the eating disorder that makes your sibling grumpy, moody, angry and hurtful and that it's not the person saying or behaving in that way. The eating disorder can override rational behaviour and limit your sibling's normal (old) behaviours.
5. **Talk** to your friends, parents, and relatives about your feelings and your fears. Attending support groups (especially for relatives of a person with an eating disorder) and or even calling a Helpline (such as ours) may also be useful.
6. **Try** to continue normal sibling activities that you shared before your sibling became ill.
7. **Respect** that it may be difficult for your sibling to talk about what they're going through, but let them know that there is no time limit on your support and you'd be happy to listen and be there when they feel ready.
8. **Enjoy** time away from the home environment, to recharge, to do "normal" activities. It is also important to try and not to let your sibling's illness dominate your thoughts for a few hours. As hard as this is, reassure yourself that your sibling will be OK whilst you're spending some time to yourself, that it's OK to do this - don't feel guilty about it!

9. **Consider** seeking professional help for yourself to talk about what you may be feeling and experiencing. You may like to talk to a school welfare worker, a psychologist or counsellor. By talking to someone you may think about things in a different way and empower you with skills to better deal with situations. Often in talking to someone your feelings and emotions can be validated as normal and ok.
10. As eating disorders can affect all members of family in different ways it's **important to talk** about what's going on –whether you choose to talk about it as a family or look at getting some outside help.

Where do I go for more information and support?

The Eating Disorders Foundation of Victoria (EDFV) has a range of services that includes a Helpline that can offer you support, information and referrals. We also run support groups and have listings of other support groups across Melbourne and Victoria.

For more information on this topic refer to:

- EDFV (2000), Information on Eating Disorders for Families, Partners and Friends, 70 page booklet
- EDFV Reading List (available from the EDFV office)

Websites and Online Support

- **EDFV** - www.eatingdisorders.org.au
- **Siblings Australia** – Services for brothers and sisters of children with a special need or chronic illness www.siblingsaustralia.org.au
- **Message board and chat room designed** for siblings of a person with an eating disorder - <http://www.something-fishy.org/online/familyfriends.php>

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