



What to Expect During Eating Disorder Treatment

Treating eating disorders can be a physically, emotionally and mentally challenging process. For those entering treatment, there may be significant physical changes, and for parents, there may be resistance and anger from your child. Knowing beforehand what to expect can help alleviate some of the anxiety and help set realistic expectations. Below are some tips to help navigate the emotional and physical aspects of recovery.

Types of Eating Disorder Treatment

Eating disorder treatment is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Every individual's treatment plan will depend on the severity of the disorder, their specific needs and the availability of resources. Among the most common treatment options are:

Outpatient Treatment

For those with mild eating disorders or those transitioning out of higher levels of care, outpatient treatment offers regular visits with a therapist, dietitian and sometimes a medical provider. This type of care allows the person to maintain their regular routine, including school or work, while receiving support.

Intensive Outpatient Programs (IOP)

This option offers more frequent therapy sessions, usually three to five times a week. It's designed for individuals who need more support than traditional outpatient care but don't require full-time supervision.

Partial Hospitalization Programs (PHP)

PHP offers structured treatment five to seven days a week, often including medical monitoring and therapeutic meals, but allows the person to return home at night. This is an appropriate option for those in need of more comprehensive care but not full-time residential treatment.

Residential/Inpatient Treatment

For severe cases, inpatient or residential care provides 24/7 supervision and a structured environment. This intensive form of treatment is necessary when the eating disorder has severely impacted a person's physical and mental health. It's a space where individuals can focus solely on recovery without outside distractions.

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Treatment for eating disorders can vary and include outpatient, intensive outpatient (IOP), partial hospitalization (PHP), residential/inpatient, or some combination over time.

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Expect Physical Changes — and Know That They're Okay

One of the most challenging aspects of eating disorder treatment lies in the physical changes that accompany recovery. Depending on the type of eating disorder, individuals may experience rapid shifts in their weight and eating patterns. This can be alarming for both individuals and their families but is an integral part of the healing process.

For example, someone with binge eating disorder or bulimia may experience noticeable weight loss. This can happen relatively quickly, especially with a balanced diet and medical supervision. On the other hand, those struggling with anorexia or other restrictive disorders will likely experience weight gain as part of their recovery. This can be especially difficult for someone who associates weight gain with negative emotions, but it's a necessary step toward regaining strength and overall health.

Be Ready for Emotional Reactions

For parents, deciding to send a child to treatment can be a difficult decision. It's not uncommon for children or adolescents to be resistant or angry when faced with inpatient or residential treatment. This is a normal reaction, since those struggling with eating disorders are usually deeply attached to their harmful habits and may not fully understand the need for intervention.

It's important to keep in mind the following when your child is undergoing eating disorder treatment:

Expect Resistance

Many children will push back or refuse treatment at first. They may accuse you of being overbearing, unsupportive or even feel betrayed. Understand that this backlash stems from fear and anxiety about losing control over their eating habits.

Stay Firm

It's important to remain firm and consistent in your decision. A child in the grip of an eating disorder may not be capable of seeing the long-term damage being done to their body and mental health. Your decision to seek treatment is a decision to save their life, even if they don't see it that way at first.

Know That They Will Understand in Time

Over time, most children come to understand that their parents made the best decision for their health. As they progress through treatment, they may begin to see the world more clearly, realizing how much their eating disorder was controlling them and how much you care about their well-being. In many cases, this realization strengthens the bond between parents and their children.

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If you or someone you know is struggling with food and body image concerns, it's important to seek professional help. You can find additional resources through the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) or call the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa & Associated Disorders (ANAD) Helpline at 888-375-7767.

