



Helping others to understand Anorexia

One of the things which made my life more difficult whilst I recovered from anorexia was the reaction and treatment I received from people around me. From family and so-called friends to strangers in the street and the nurses and staff who were supposed to be looking after me, I was met with mixed reception and often attacked personally for being the way I was. It didn't occur to many people that anorexia wasn't a choice – just as cancer and MS aren't choices. It is a very difficult thing for people to get their heads around – which is why I do what I do with a goal of using my own experience to explain anorexia to others. I hope that the resources I have written and shared on this site have helped you to understand anorexia – but once you understand, how do you help others to do the same?

Explain that anorexia is not a choice

This is the first and most important thing to explain to a family member or friend – anorexia is an illness, just like a physical illness, and therefore, choice doesn't really come into it. Grandparents and older generations especially can be scathing about mental illness in general, but especially anorexia – because food is such a huge element in our lives. Every time a family meal comes around or a visit (accompanied by tea and biscuits), your child's illness is starkly emphasised and becomes an issue. Even my teachers and the nurses who were supposed to be caring for me implied that I was being awkward and obstinate – that I should stop being so bloody stubborn and 'just eat'. Yes, as an individual a person with anorexia has the power and responsibility to recover – nobody can do it for them. But they need support and help to get there – and what they don't need is people telling them to 'stop'.

Explain that anorexia is about more than just food

Another common misconception about anorexia is that it is all about food. Because it manifests itself in the form of an extreme diet and fitness regime resulting in dramatic weight loss, most people assume that the person is image obsessed and overly concerned with their weight. But this is a symptom, not necessarily a cause (although in my case, I was influenced by these things). Anorexia has many causes as you will have read in previous documents – and it is often accompanied by other mental illnesses (depression, self-harm, OCD). To simplify it for a person who doesn't understand, explain that it is a form of self-hatred and a need for control which is not just appearance-related. Perfectionism and a feeling of inadequacy are often behind anorexia, along with traumatic family

events and a loss of control over life such as death or unemployment. Be prepared for people to assume otherwise and not be prepared to consider that there might be more to it than meets the eye.

Explain that there are two entities in your child's head

Use my analogy of a demonic entity that needs exorcising to help the person separate your child away from their behaviour. Explain that your child needs love and encouragement, but anorexia needs showing where to go. That's why your behaviour and the way you handle them might seem strange. People might start telling you what to do: 'well, I wouldn't have done it like that' or 'you're letting them get away with it' or 'you're being too harsh.' Unless that person is a psychiatrist experienced in eating disorders, *take no notice*.

Explain that guilt and blame are not helpful

If a family member starts berating your child for 'not eating' or highlighting the effect of 'what they are doing' is having on the family as a whole, then please stop them and explain that this will make things worse. Just because a person with anorexia continues with what they are doing helplessly, it does not mean they are not guilty. They think they are in control, but they're not. They can hear the things you are saying to them and deep down inside they want to be 'normal' and to stop but they don't feel able to. They are not poorly on purpose and they're certainly not making a choice to behave in this way – as explained above. It's as bad as blaming someone with cancer for having cancer – so once again use this analogy if you have to and explain that anorexia is an illness, not a choice.

For more help and support, you can find more articles like this on the Tough Cookie Parent Resource Page or download the free parent resource book.