



What is helpful (and what's not)

It's difficult to know what to say and do and how to behave when you have a child with anorexia. You can get into a cycle of feeling as though you are always saying the wrong thing, unsure of whether you are making things better or worse. But once you know what is the right and wrong thing, you can begin in earnest to help your child to overcome anorexia.

What is helpful

Being caring and understanding

It can be difficult to be kind to somebody who has become unrecognisable from the person you love – somebody who withdraws completely from the life you once shared and screams at you and tells you they hate you. But if you consistently and frequently show how much you care, you strengthen the person within – even if it doesn't appear that way on the outside. Recovery can be a long and slow process – and not one which is instantaneous or always blindingly visible as progress is made. Small acts of kindness, such as my parents taking me out in my wheelchair for long walks, people offering to come and sit and talk to me without judging me, or a smile instead of a long, horrified stare stayed with me and helped me to feel as though I was worthy of having my life back.

Being firm when you need to be

A mistake many parents make is pandering to anorexia – thinking they are doing what their child wants them to do and in turn, making them happy. When you buy low fat yoghurts, when you buy low carb bread, when you allow them to do their exercise in the evening, you are not appeasing your child – you are appeasing anorexia and contributing to their demise. You will need to be very strong and very firm with your child. It will seem like you are upsetting them – and that is the hardest thing of all – but remember you are not upsetting *them*, you are upsetting anorexia – and that is the only way to help them to overcome it.

Understanding the difference between Anorexia and your loved one

To help your child, you need to be able to differentiate between the behaviour which belongs to them, and the behaviour which belongs to anorexia. When someone is very poorly, most of

their behaviour can be attributed to anorexia – the things they do and say, the way they speak. But this doesn't mean that they are not still there inside – and occasionally, they will break through. This will happen more frequently as they recover and as you remind them that life is worth living – showing them how much you care and spending quality time with them doing things which are not related to anorexia or to food.

Helping the person to rediscover themselves

Take time out to do activities with your child that they enjoy – preferably things they enjoyed before they were poorly – and to plan for the future. This was something which helped me greatly – from the big things like talking about my future dreams of living abroad and a career feeling they were palpable and achievable down to small things like being taken out to look at some flowers in a park or to the garden centre to look at the pets in the pet shop.

What's not helpful

Mistaking the person for Anorexia, and vice versa

Remember that it's very difficult to always get it right when you are telling the difference between your child and anorexia. When things they say and do seem out of character it's fairly easy to see that they are not acting from their own rationality – but anorexia is often accompanied by other mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety, self-harm and body dysmorphia. This means that your child might say things that shock you, but they are crying out for help. Whenever your child does or says something you feel angry about or believe is a trait of anorexia, take a moment to analyse it and consider whether it really is anorexia or perhaps something else. Similarly, parents commonly come to believe that their child has just 'gone off' a particular type of food or that an innocent request to be allowed out for a walk is their way of asking for space. It might be – but it's more likely that anorexia is behind this behaviour.

Pointing the finger

Playing the blame game is easily done when you think that anorexia is ruining your life (and the person you love's life, too). But taking it out on them will not help things – and in fact this is likely to make their condition worse (see below). Some parents mistakenly think that pointing out how bad things are or 'guilt tripping' sufferers for their behaviour will make them 'reconsider' and 'think twice' - but don't forget that this isn't a choice for them – they can't help what is happening and they need your support. Additionally, don't ever call them 'stupid' or tell them they're 'not trying hard enough'. Believe me, they'll be giving it everything they've got and you need to show them that life is worth living, help them see that they are worthy of a healthy and happy life.

Taking frustrations out on the person in question

There is nothing worse when you are trapped inside your own head with a compelling voice which bullies you to do the things you do than somebody chastising and abusing you for your behaviour. This usually happens when a) a parent reaches the end of their tether or b) they are mistaking the child for anorexia and vice versa and getting mixed up between the two. Either way, this sort of behaviour stays with you and can hamper recovery. It weakens the person left inside, but makes anorexia stronger, reinforcing and giving evidence to those negative beliefs at the root of the illness ('see, they hate you – you're better off dead. Look, you're making them upset and angry. You're a bad person.') It is completely natural and understandable that you will feel anger and frustration at many stages of your child's illness. But please try not to take it out on them.

Not looking after yourself

If you don't look after your own emotional wellbeing, then you certainly can't help your child to fight off anorexia. Although you will be drained after spending all your time and energy trying to help them, make sure you do take a little time to look after yourself. Get counselling and support, make sure you are talking about what is happening with someone rather than taking the burden on your own shoulders. Most of all, ensure you're eating properly and taking care of your body as well as your mind.