



Anorexia: What to do if you're struggling for support

One of the most frustrating things about anorexia is the lack of support many people are able to get access to. I think this is partly down to issues with provision and funding on the NHS, and also misunderstanding and ignorance at GP and education levels where professionals hold the power to spot anorexia early.

I want to start by telling you that I was one of those people left to fend for themselves. My GP searched and searched for help – but none of the scarce charities around at the time could offer any support and the local CAMHS were edgy about accepting a referral – even though I was already underweight at that point and rapidly shedding more. When we finally did get a referral, the therapists who were supposed to care for me didn't and made things worse. I was admitted to a general children's ward where doctors and some of the nurses treated me badly. I was eventually sent home just a little heavier than I had been when I arrived yet with anorexia stronger than it had ever been. Yet despite all this, I am here today and free from anorexia.

For those reading this with children under the age of 16 as I was, sadly being 'underage' does reduce the amount of options which are available – but on the positive side, you as a parent have more control over what happens to your child, as when they are an adult they do have a choice whether to access services and engage with them or not. There are now so many more places in EDUs and hospitals than there were when I was poorly – so it is always worth trying. If you don't get anywhere it is **not** the end of the road – I am proof of that. I'm passionate about being positive about anorexia – because CAMHS and GPs surgeries are not the end and it can be beaten without them.

Here are the first steps I would advise for anyone who suspects or knows that their child has anorexia – whatever stage they may be at. If you have exhausted this list, you can always contact me for support and take a look at the list of organisations detailed on the site for more information.

Contact your GP

Great GPs with a good understanding of mental health (and anorexia in particular) are luck of the draw. My GP at 11 years old dismissed my severe OCD as 'over sensitivity' - but had she picked it up and found support for me I may not have developed anorexia just a couple of years

later. However whilst she didn't understand the illness in much detail, the GP I had at the time of my developing anorexia did know that urgency was vital if I was going to pull through. Yet despite her best efforts, she couldn't find anybody who was willing or able to help me.

The message here is if you feel you are not being listened to by your GP, you need to see someone else. Get a second opinion. Demand that your child is offered a diagnosis from someone with experience – and don't stop until you are taken seriously. Persistence and determination is key – don't take no for an answer.

Contact charities

Charities weren't very helpful when I was poorly – probably because they were geared more towards adults with anorexia and therefore weren't sure what to do when it came to a 14 year old with an eating disorder. However things have changed and there are now more organisations (just like me) who are especially interested in helping people with anorexia. I would suggest drafting a template email (for ease and quickness you can use the one I provide on the site) and sending a blanket out to them all asking what resources they can help you to obtain. Although they don't specifically deal with anorexia, nationwide charity Mind are also good – they have local offices in most areas so you can even pop in and speak to someone if you'd like to.

Go straight to your local ED unit

Give your local health service a call either at the hospital or at a specialist unit run by Priory or another healthcare provider. Explain that you need help and ask them honestly what their opinion is regarding a referral. This doesn't always guarantee that you will get any help immediately (or at all) but it is certainly worth speaking to someone who understands your situation and can perhaps point you in the right direction, explaining what you need to say and do to get a referral from your GP or another healthcare professional.

I have support but it isn't helpful/not working. What should I do now?

Unfortunately, I had a bad experience with CAMHS and I hear a lot of others who go through the same thing – as well as speaking to despairing parents who are frustrated and desperate because their child is getting worse, not better – even with 'help' from professional services. In this instance you should firstly speak up and ask for a different therapist. You may not be listened to, but if your child is telling you they want to change, then you should take them seriously.

The difficult thing with anorexia is that of course, sufferers appear as though they don't want help. But there is a difference between not wanting help and disliking therapists because they are going against what anorexia wants, and all of the above yet being made to feel worse because you don't have a connection with your therapist, or they are clueless and you don't feel

listened to or understood. This was the case with me – but unfortunately (and unsurprisingly) I was never taken seriously when I asked to change and my mum and dad were rarely listened to. However as a parent, you do have the authority and the right to ask for a second opinion or an alternative therapist if your child appears not to making any progress or openly says they genuinely dislike their therapist.

If this doesn't work, then you may need to do what my parents did for me – and take up the gauntlet yourself. The responsibility shouldn't all be on you – you can look for support and help on forums and via parent groups, charities and free counselling. If you feel the pressure is too much and you can't cope alone, then you can explore traditional avenues once again. Whatever you decide to do, know and believe it absolutely is possible to recover from anorexia.