

# Challenging Eating Disorder Thoughts



## Before Getting Started...

Take a few minutes to discuss the following questions with your nutritionist:

- What thoughts go through your mind when you eat a fear food or challenge food?
- What thoughts go through your mind when you step on the scale, look in the mirror, or compare your body to someone else's?
- In the past, how have negative thoughts about food or your body impacted the way you eat or exercise?

## What Are Eating Disorder Thoughts?

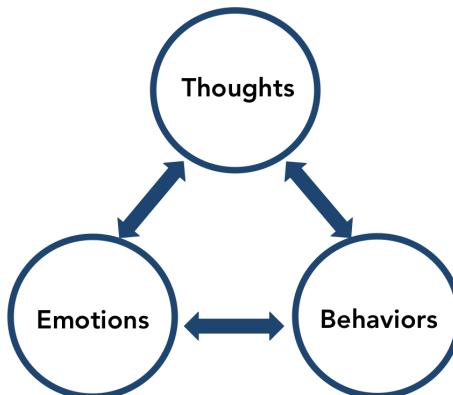
An eating disorder distorts the way you think about food, nutrition, and your body, causing you to eat and/or exercise in a way that can be harmful to your physical and mental health. Research actually shows people with eating disorders have chemical changes that happen in the brain that impact the way they think about food, nutrition, and their bodies.<sup>1</sup>

The unhealthy and distorted thoughts that someone with an eating disorder experiences is sometimes referred to as his or her “eating disorder voice.” Acknowledging that eating disorders cause mental distortions can help people with eating disorders separate themselves from their eating disorder. Here are some examples of what someone’s eating disorder voice may sound like:

- “I’m going to gain ## pounds from eating that.”
- “I can’t eat that unless I exercise for ## minutes.”
- “I need to track my calories because I can’t trust my body.”

## How Do I Challenge My Eating Disorder Thoughts?

Your eating disorder thoughts can negatively impact your emotions and behaviors, which are all interconnected. However, *you* have control over how you respond to your thoughts. By identifying disordered eating thoughts and recognizing how they relate to your behaviors and emotions, you can learn how to challenge and fight your eating disorder.



## Strategies To Recognize and Challenge Your Eating Disorder

### I. Limit and Eventually Replace Unhealthy BEHAVIORS

Work with your nutritionist to start to recognize your disordered behaviors and transition to healthy eating and exercise behaviors. Every step you take towards positive behavior changes allows you to become more comfortable and confident in your ability to break away from unhealthy behaviors and separate yourself from your eating disorder. Here are some examples of unhealthy and healthy eating and exercise behaviors:

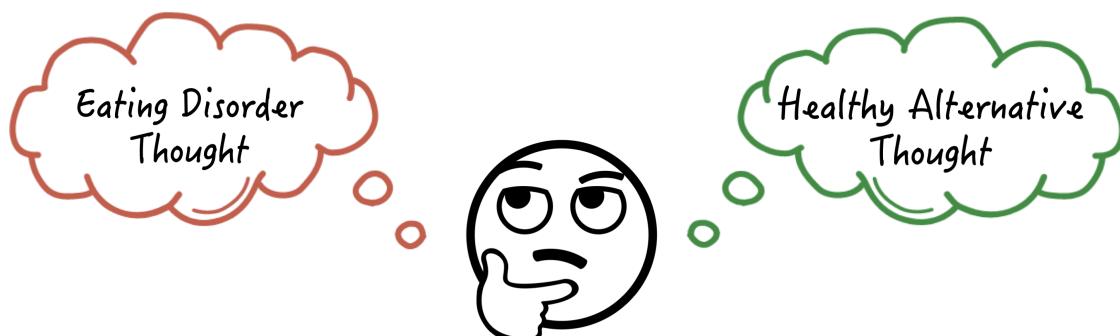
UNHEALTHY BEHAVIORS	→	HEALTHY BEHAVIORS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Limiting yourself to ##### calories, or certain nutrients and foods</li><li>•Binge eating</li><li>•Purging</li><li>•Over-exercising</li><li>•Frequently looking in the mirror, comparing body, or weighing self</li><li>•Frequently reading nutrition labels or tracking calories</li></ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Meeting your energy and nutrition needs with balanced meals and snacks</li><li>•Giving yourself permission to eat all foods, free of guilt and shame</li><li>•Moving your body in a way that feels good</li><li>•Coping with anxiety and other emotions in a productive way</li></ul>

#### Questions for You:

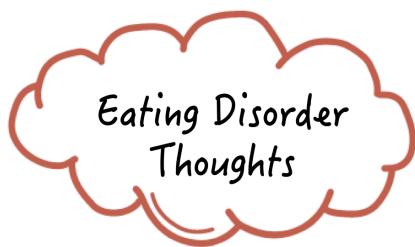
- What is one unhealthy behavior around eating or exercise that you could work on replacing with a healthier behavior?
- What steps could you take to reach this goal?

### 2. Recognize and Challenge Disordered THOUGHTS

Your eating disorder voice often gets louder when you start refraining from disordered eating and exercise behaviors. Learning how to recognize your eating disorder voice is extremely important so that you can fight this voice and continue working towards healthy habits. All-or-nothing thinking, over-generalizing, and over-exaggerating negative aspects are all examples of distorted thought patterns. Your eating disorder treatment team can help you become more aware of your eating disorder distortions and reframe disordered thoughts into more rational and healthy thoughts about food and your body.



Here are a few examples of eating disorder thoughts and ways to reframe them:



To be happy/healthy, I need to weigh #### pounds.

I'm not hungry so I don't need to eat.

My anxiety gets worse if I don't count calories or [insert eating disorder behavior here].

I'm fat. I hate my [body part]. I don't deserve to eat.

My weight is only one component of my health. It's healthy for weight to change during different stages of life. Micromanaging my weight is a waste of time.

I'm not hungry because I haven't been giving my body the nutrition it needs. Even if I don't feel hungry, I need to eat regularly so I can restore my hunger and fullness cues.

Being obsessive about food and my body is not a healthy way to manage my anxiety. Feeling uncomfortable when I challenge my eating disorder is normal and necessary to fully recover.

My perception of my body is distorted and I'm not thinking rationally. I need to nourish my body to feel better physically and emotionally and appreciate my body for all it does for me.

### **Questions for You:**

- What is one thing that your eating disorder often tells you?
  
- What could be a healthy alternative thought that you could say in response?

### **But... What if I Can't Think of a Healthy Alternative Thought?**

It's common to be overcritical and unforgiving towards yourself while being supportive and compassionate to your friends and family. If you're finding it difficult to think of healthy alternative thoughts to replace disordered thoughts, ask yourself these questions:

- What would you say to a friend if he/she talked to himself/herself this way?
- What would you say if a three year old talked about him/herself this way?

### **3. Find Positive Ways to Cope with Your FEELINGS:**

At some point, your eating disorder may have helped you handle difficult situations and emotions so it's normal to feel more anxious and uncomfortable in your body when you stop using disordered eating behaviors. To avoid returning to past disordered behaviors in unfamiliar and stressful situations, it's important to work with your therapist or psychologist to find healthy ways to identify and cope with your emotions.

Positive coping strategies look different for everyone so trying out different strategies can help you figure out what works best for you in different situations. Here are a few examples:

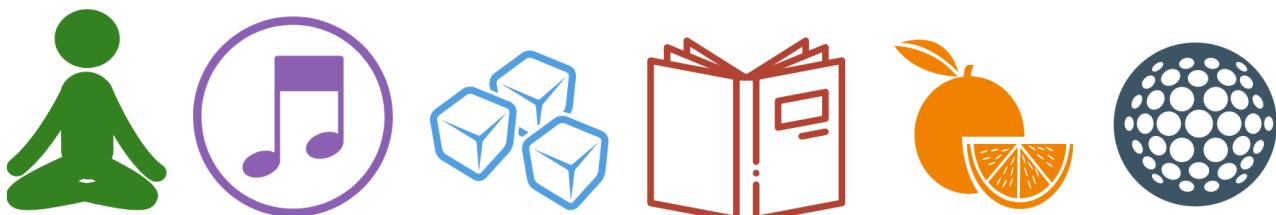
*Relaxation:* Deep breathing – Guided meditation – Progressive muscle relaxation

*Activity:* Play with a pet – Draw – Watch TV – Read a book – Listen to music – Talk to a friend

*Self Soothe:* Take a bath or shower – Squeeze a ball – Peel an orange – Lotion your hands

*Reframe Thoughts:* Repeat a mantra ("I can do this") – Remind self of goal (full recovery)

*Other coping skills:* \_\_\_\_\_



Here are two scenarios where teens have learned how to use positive coping skills to manage their emotions and fight their eating disorder voice:

**Scenario #1:** Alex and his anxiety around cake.

Alex is at his friend's birthday party and is offered a slice of cake. Alex hasn't eaten cake in a year because it was previously a fear food for him and he feels anxious eating.

**Coping Strategy:** While Alex ate a slice of cake, he distracted himself from his eating disorder thoughts by talking with his friend at the table. When his eating disorder voice started to take over with negative thoughts, he counted to ten, took a deep breath, and told himself "*the more I fight my eating disorder, the easier it will get. I can get through this.*"

**Scenario #2:** Brie and her urge to binge eat when depressed.

Brie is home alone watching TV a few hours after dinner and is feeling sad. Brie used to binge eat cookies and candy when she was feeling lonely and in between diets.

**Coping Strategy:** Brie turned off the TV, put a few cookies on a plate, poured a glass of milk, and sat at the table enjoying her snack. After eating and feeling satisfied with her snack, she went to her room to talk to her friend on her phone.

**Questions for You:**

- In what situations do you find it hardest to fight your eating disorder behaviors?
  
- What do you think are one or two coping strategies that could help you get through these situations?

**Remember: Ride the Wave**

Sometimes, no matter how hard you may try to deal with your emotions, there may be nothing that you can do to change how you're feeling in the moment. You simply have to ride the wave, let your emotions come and go, and know that what you're feeling in the moment is only temporary. Learning how to sit with the discomfort is an important skill in eating disorder recovery. Every time you challenge your eating disorder voice, you will feel more confident in your ability to fight your eating disorder.



## What Does This Mean For Me?

Take a few minutes to think through the information shared in this handout and answer the questions listed below:

1. What can I start doing to help me challenge my eating disorder thoughts and focus on healthy eating goals?

2. What could I start doing to help me process and cope with my emotions?

3. Who could I ask to support me in meeting these goals?

## To Learn More:

Recovery Warriors- Eating Disorder Recovery Support: [recoverywarriors.com](http://recoverywarriors.com)

The Body Positive: [www.thebodypositive.org](http://www.thebodypositive.org)

Scritchfield, R. *Body Kindness* (2016) and website ([www.bodykindnessbook.com](http://www.bodykindnessbook.com))

Schaefer, J. *Goodbye Ed, Hello Me* (2009).

Herrin M, Matsumoto N. *The Parent's Guide to Eating Disorders* (2010).

## References:

Avena, Nicole M., and Miriam E. Bocarsly. "Dysregulation of brain reward systems in eating disorders: neurochemical information from animal models of binge eating, bulimia nervosa, and anorexia nervosa." *Neuropharmacology* 63.1 (2012): 87-96.

Dalle Grave, Riccardo, et al. "Enhanced cognitive behaviour therapy for adolescents with anorexia nervosa: an alternative to family therapy?." *Behaviour research and therapy* 51.1 (2013): R9-R12.

Lock, James. "An update on evidence-based psychosocial treatments for eating disorders in children and adolescents." *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology* 44.5 (2015): 707-721.