

# What Does Eating Disorder Recovery Look Like?

## Before Getting Started...

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

- What do you think eating disorder recovery involves?
- What worries you most about recovering from your eating disorder?
- What do you think life without your eating disorder would look like?

## What's the First Step in Treating an Eating Disorder?

Since eating disorders have medical, nutritional, and emotional causes and consequences, working with a team of health care providers that specializes in eating disorders is essential. Each health care provider plays a unique and equally important role in helping you recover from your eating disorder. Here are some things they might do for you:



### **Medical Doctor or Nurse Practitioner:**

- Monitor your height, weight, blood pressure, heart rate, and other vital signs; evaluate blood tests, urine samples, bone density scans, and other health indicators
- Recommend medication and/or vitamin and mineral supplements
- Discuss weight goals and possible exercise limitations



### **Registered Dietitian Nutritionist:**

- Address nutrient deficiencies, disordered eating behaviors, and food and nutrition beliefs
- Work with you and your family to create an eating plan that meets your nutrition needs
- Help you normalize your relationship with food with a focus on flexibility and variety



### **Therapist or Psychologist:**

- Help you understand your eating disorder thoughts and behaviors
- Teach positive coping skills to manage mood and emotions and provide strategies to increase self-esteem and body image
- Involve your parents for support and guidance
- If family-based treatment (FBT) therapist is recommended, an FBT therapist will work with you and your family



Other important team members may include a psychiatrist if other mental illnesses co-exist, a gastroenterologist if digestive issues persist, or an occupational therapist for food exposure and transition care.

## What Treatment Options Are Available?

There are many different levels of care available for eating disorder treatment. Your treatment team will recommend a level of care based on your current medical, emotional, and nutritional needs. It's common to transition between levels of care during different stages of your eating disorder recovery. Below is an overview of each level of care:

**\*Outpatient:** For teens who are medically stable (heart rate, blood pressure, electrolytes, and other vital signs are in a normal range) and capable of continuing with their typical daily routines. *Treatment Structure:* Individual appointments with your nutritionist, doctor or nurse, and therapist or psychologist on a regular basis.

**Intensive Outpatient Program (IOP):** For teens who are medically stable but would benefit from additional support and supervision from health care providers. Members of your treatment team will vary depending on the program but will be from outside of Boston Children's Hospital. However, some teens will continue to meet regularly with their outpatient nutritionist and doctor or nurse at Boston Children's Hospital. *Treatment Structure:* Group meetings with other teens 3 to 5 times per week for about 3 hours each (conducive with school schedule) and some supervised meals and snacks at the program.

**\*Family-Based Treatment (FBT):** For teens with restrictive eating disorder behaviors whose family is interested and able to commit to treating their teen's eating disorder within the home environment. *Treatment Structure:* Weekly family meetings with a therapist who specializes in FBT in an outpatient setting. All meals and snacks served and supervised by parents. A medical provider and dietitian will often consult with the family as needed.

**Partial Hospitalization/Day Program (PHP):** For teens who are medically stable but would benefit from daily support and supervision by a treatment team (therapist, nutritionist, and nurse or doctor) outside of Boston Children's Hospital. *Treatment Structure:* Group and individual meetings with a treatment team for 6 to 8 hours/day (leave program at night), including some supervised meals and snacks at the program location.

**Residential Program:** For teens who are medically stable but would benefit from living at a program full-time with ongoing support and supervision by a treatment team (therapist, nutritionist, and nurse or doctor) outside of Boston Children's Hospital. *Treatment Structure:* 24-hour care with group and individual meetings with a treatment team at the program facility (stay at program overnight). All meals and snacks are supervised. Family and friends are regularly welcome to visit and support teens during scheduled visiting hours.

**\*Inpatient:** For teens who are not medically stable or teens who did not benefit from levels of care listed above. *Treatment Structure:* 24-hour hospital care with close medical monitoring by a treatment team (nutritionist and nurse or doctor) until teens are medically stable. Teens usually transition to a residential program, PHP, or IOP after inpatient care.

\*Services offered at Boston Children's Hospital

## Eating Disorder Treatment Centers for Teens/Young Adults

Your clinician can work with you to find a treatment program within your local area. Below are a few examples of eating disorder programs in Eastern Massachusetts, including the levels of care available at each program as of 2018.

Program	Levels of Care	Location(s)
Walden Behavioral Care	Outpatient, IOP, PHP, Residential, and Inpatient	Waltham, Braintree, Peabody, Milford
The Renfrew Center*	Outpatient, IOP, PHP, Residential	Boston
Monte Nido	IOP, PHP, Residential	Medford, Boston
Klarman Eating Disorder Center*	PHP, Residential	Belmont
Cambridge Eating Disorder Center	Outpatient, PHP, Residential	Cambridge

Note: Not every location has all levels of care; check with treatment center for their current options

### How Long Does Eating Disorder Recovery Take?

Recovery is a marathon, not a sprint. Everyone moves through the stages of eating disorder recovery at a different pace. It's important not to compare your treatment plan to someone else's; eating disorders are unique and treatment is individualized based on your circumstances and needs. Physical recovery (restoring weight, stabilizing vital signs, treating nutrition deficiencies, etc.) is typically the first step in treatment. Psychological recovery (normalizing eating, improving body image, etc.) often takes more time and is much more effective when your body and brain are nourished adequately and consistently. For this reason, the sooner weight is restored and/or malnutrition is treated, the greater your likelihood of fully recovering from your eating disorder.<sup>1,2</sup>



### Why Work with a Nutritionist During Eating Disorder Recovery?

An eating disorder can distort your thoughts and beliefs about food and nutrition and leave you feeling disconnected from your body. 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>3</sup> This can make it difficult to eat in a way that supports your overall health and meets your body's nutrition needs.

A nutritionist specialized in eating disorders can help you challenge food and nutrition beliefs with evidence-based research and can work with you to nourish your mind and body with an individualized eating plan. The next page provides an overview some of the stages of eating that your nutritionist may guide you through during eating disorder recovery.

# Shifting Eating Patterns During Eating Disorder Recovery

## What Does it Look Like?

- A meal plan with structured meals and snacks based on exchanges or food groups
- Regular check-ins with your dietitian to adjust your meal plan as needed
- Support during meal and snack times (parent, nurse, guidance counselor, etc.)

## Why Is It Important?

- To provide adequate nutrition to treat a malnourished brain
- To restore metabolism and hormones and reset hunger and fullness cues
- To strengthen muscles and rebuild tissues like the heart and digestive tract

## Helpful Tips:

- Focus on nutrient-dense foods; bloating, early fullness, and GI upset is common.
- Avoid tracking calories, weighing yourself, or comparing your eating to others
- Work with your therapist on coping with body changes and disordered thoughts

1.

**STRUCTURED  
EATING**



2.

**EXPERIMENTAL  
EATING**



## What Does it Look Like?

- A meal plan with more independent food choices and greater food variety
- Experimenting with "fun foods" in a supportive and safe environment
- Slowly reintroducing foods you previously enjoyed, free of judgment

## Why Is It Important?

- To increase your confidence in your ability to make food choices that support your health and learn from difficult situations that may arise
- To practice challenging disordered eating thoughts and the all-or-nothing mindset about food

## Helpful Tips:

- Make a specific plan about how you will try a "fun food" for the first time: *When will you try it? Where? With whom?*
- Talk with family and friends about how they can best support you at meal times (ex. encouragement, distraction, etc.)

## What Does it Look Like?

- Allowing hunger and fullness to guide food choices rather than a meal plan
- Regularly eating a balance and variety of food groups
- Choosing foods that are both physically and emotionally filling and satisfying

## Why Is It Important?

- To reconnect with hunger and fullness cues and trust your body's signals
- To keep your body nourished, your brain focused, and your mindset flexible
- To give you more mental space to focus on other important areas of your life

## Helpful Tips:

- Intuitive eating is not about perfection; be curious, not judgmental in times when you may overeat or under-eat
- Surround yourself with friends and family who can support you

3.

**INTUITIVE  
EATING**

## What Can I Do to Increase My Chances of Fully Recovering?

It can be common for teens with eating disorders to reach partial recovery, where they go through the motions of treatment but are not fully ready to give up their eating disorder. To give yourself the best chance of fully recovering, here are a few important steps you can take: (Adapted from the National Eating Disorders Association)

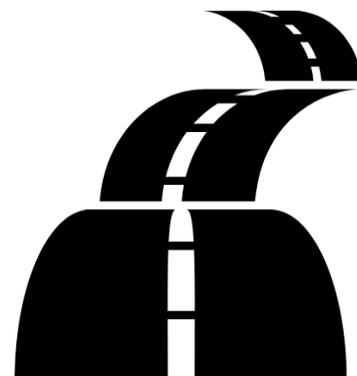
**1. Don't be afraid to ask for support:** Your treatment team will be there during every step of your eating disorder recovery. However, it's important that you also feel comfortable reaching out to supportive family members or friends whom you can talk to during your recovery process. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness; it's a sign of strength.

**2. Expect that you're going to feel uncomfortable:** Your eating disorder was a safety net that may have made you feel in control and safe at one point. Letting go of disordered eating can often bring up painful emotions and make you feel physically uncomfortable. Working through your emotions and the discomfort are important parts of the healing process. Learning how to express your emotions and cope with them is essential.

**3. Celebrate small successes and learn from set backs:** Whether it's being able to eat out at a restaurant or take a bite of a "challenge" food, it's important to give yourself credit for your efforts and acknowledge that small successes bring you closer to recovery. On the other hand, know that set backs are inevitable. Learning what may have led to a setback and how you can deal with triggers in the future can help you refocus your energy.

## The Road to Eating Disorder Recovery

While everyone's journey through eating disorder recovery is different, encountering some bumps along the way is common. It's important to remember that a setback (or relapse) is not a sign of failure. In fact, setbacks are a valuable part of recovery, allowing you to face challenges and grow stronger because of them. Recovery can be frustrating, scary, and uncomfortable at times, but with patience, support, and persistence full recovery is possible.



## What Does This Mean For Me?

1. What steps in eating disorder recovery do you feel ready to make right now?
2. What part of eating disorder recovery do you think would be the most challenging for you?
3. How can your treatment team (medical provider, therapist, nutritionist) best support you?

## To Learn More:

National Eating Disorders Association: [www.nationaleatingdisorders.org](http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org)

Multi-Service Eating Disorders Association: [www.medainc.org](http://www.medainc.org)

Center For Young Women's Health: [youngwomenshealth.org/nutrition-fitness-index/](http://youngwomenshealth.org/nutrition-fitness-index/)

Center For Young Men's Health: [youngmenshealth.org/nutrition-fitness-index/](http://youngmenshealth.org/nutrition-fitness-index/)

Families Empowered and Supporting Treatment of Eating Disorders: [www.feast-ed.org](http://www.feast-ed.org)

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

Lock J, Le Grange D. *Helping Your Teenager Beat an Eating Disorder* (2015).

O'Toole J. *Give Food a Chance: A New View on Childhood Eating Disorders* (2015).

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

## References:

1. Madden, Sloane, et al. "Early weight gain in family-based treatment predicts greater weight gain and remission at the end of treatment and remission at 12-month follow-up in adolescent anorexia nervosa." *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 48.7 (2015): 919-922.
2. Le Grange, Daniel, et al. "Early weight gain predicts outcome in two treatments for adolescent anorexia nervosa." *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 47.2 (2014): 124-129.
3. 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.