

# Managing Mealtimes

## Family support guide for mealtimes at home:

Mealtimes can be the most difficult time of the day for a person with an eating disorder. At these times they can become **very anxious** and **feel guilty** for eating; as a result outbursts of emotion, such as aggression, and attempts to avoid the meal may result.

The following guidelines are **suggestions** that may be helpful for main meal and snack times. The aim is to **normalise eating** and to **help minimise** the perceived threat, anxiety & guilt associated with eating.

### Before the Meal:

- Plan ahead. Ensure you have the necessary ingredients in advance.
- Pre-prepare the meal if possible to minimise time in the kitchen
- Keep the young person with the eating disorder out of the kitchen. Decide what they will do and with whom while you prepare the meal.
- Stick to the meal plan like glue, do not add any extras.
- Be strict and consistent about portion sizes.
- Be consistent about mealtimes- routines are beneficial.
- Ensure the young person uses the toilet before the meal begins.
- Limit drinks.

### During the Meal:

- Keep mealtimes as normal and as calm as possible.
- Ensure others at the table are also eating and that the foods they are eating are as similar as possible.
- Try not to overly focus on the person with the eating disorder.
- Be firm and consistent. Be aware of delaying tactics.
- Avoid discussions about food, weight or appearance. Instead talk about topics such as today's activities and plans for later, TV programmes etc. Focus conversations on the person not the eating disorder.
- Be careful about the use of praise; for some this increases feelings of anxiety and guilt.
- Be vigilant about any unfinished food, e.g. yogurt left around the edges of the pot, food spread across the plate. If necessary assist with gathering unfinished food together for eating.
- Limit drinks, ideally drinks should follow the meal.
- Having the TV or radio on can be a welcome distraction.
- Avoid having visitors across the mealtime.

### After the Meal:

- Remove the plate/bowl immediately.
- Have a pre-planned *seated* distraction activity for immediately after the meal, e.g. games on an ipad, word games, boardgames, mindfulness colouring.
- Ensure that the young person is not alone for the first 20-30 minutes after the meal has finished.
- Prevent bathroom visits for 20-30 minutes after the meal has finished.

## Problem Solving

It can be common for young people and their families to face challenges around mealtimes

Below are statements or arguments that might be used to avoid or delay mealtimes

<i>Before the Meal- possible scenarios</i>	<i>Suggestions for such scenarios:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Disagreeing/ attempting to substitute foods:</b><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ "I didn't agree to that/that's not on my plan"</li><li>○ Asking to swap foods for low calorie/low fat versions.</li><li>○ Trying to get into the kitchen or be involved in food preparation.</li><li>○ Portion sizes- "That's too big" or "Your plate is smaller".</li><li>○ Trying to eat alone- "Can I eat in my room?" "You don't need to watch me" "I don't eat in front of people".</li><li>○ Delaying tactics- "I ate earlier in school"</li></ul></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Communicate with your child in a calm but firm way; the following statement may be helpful-</li><li>○ <i>"We discussed and agreed on this plan yesterday. We agreed that we wouldn't change anything during meals."</i></li></ul> <p>OR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ <i>"CAMHS have told us that changing plans and goals during mealtimes can make you more anxious. Let's stick to our plan today and talk about any changes later."</i></li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Complaining that they feel unwell.</b></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Your child may be feeling anxious or frightened in the run up to meal times causing them to feel unwell. Empathise with your child, and reassure them that it is normal to feel this way at the moment but that they still need to continue with the plan.</li></ul>

<b><i>During the Meal – possible scenarios</i></b>	<b><i>Suggestions for such scenarios.</i></b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Stalling &amp; avoiding:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Asking to go to the toilet.</li> <li>○ Playing with food.</li> <li>○ Asking for food to be reheated.</li> <li>○ Asking for different cutlery.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Complaining about the way the food is cut.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One or more of these tactics may be used to avoid eating or to cause an argument. Continue to stick to time and mealtime boundaries and <b>try to remain calm.</b></li> </ul> <p><b>Distractions</b> suggested by your CAMHS team can also be helpful in this situation.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Becoming verbally abusive or aggressive- which could result in throwing food, plates or spilling drinks.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Try to <b>remain calm</b> and reassure your child, you know it is difficult but they will have to eat and drink what is given, replace any spilt food. If you do not have leftovers cooked provide meal replacement drinks if you've had them prescribed. Refill a spilt drink fully.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Excessive condiment use</b> to mask the taste of food or make it inedible.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If this issue arises, try to season food before hand and factor this into the plan.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Covert exercising-</b> offering to fetch condiments or foods, asking to go to the toilet, finding excuses to get up from the table.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Calmly remind</b> that they need to <b>remain seated</b> during the meal, try to limit opportunities for this by planning ahead.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be aware of <b>food being hidden/mashed/crumbed</b> or broken into smaller pieces.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You could try saying <i>"I can see you're having difficulty with that (name food). Try and tell me what you're having trouble with"</i></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "I can't do this" or "I can't eat any more".</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Acknowledge how difficult this is</b> for them- keep encouraging your child. Aim to be supportive, firm and calm.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "My stomach hurts" or "I'm too full".</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Reassure your child-</b> "Yes you feel full. That's normal but scary for you at the same time, Over time, if you eat more regularly you won't feel so uncomfortable".</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Total refusal to eat.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Keep encouraging your child</b> and remind them of the original agreement with the CAMHS team including consequences if the meal plan is not followed.</li> </ul>

<b><u>After the Meal- possible scenarios</u></b>	<b><u>Suggestions for such scenarios:</u></b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It's very common for a young person to feel overwhelmed by the following emotions in the period after the meal:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anger- lashing out verbally or physically.</li> <li>• Low mood- seeming withdrawn</li> <li>• Guilt and shame.</li> <li>• Blame- at others or themselves.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to reassure your child and <b>remain calm and supportive</b>. Avoid getting into discussion about food/diets and weight at this time.</li> <li>• This is a good time to <b>use some distractions</b> that were planned earlier. Such as iPad's, watching TV, art &amp; craft activities, jigsaw, playing a game etc.</li> <li>• Acknowledge that this has been a huge effort for them- but <b>avoid praising them for eating</b>.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Complaining of stomach pain or nausea.</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Reassure your child</b> and remind them that this is normal and that over time with regular eating they will feel less uncomfortable.</li> </ul>