

Use of Food in Phase 1: The Mini Meal Intervention

Purpose

The 'mini meal' is a targeted intervention used during the initial assessment of a young person with an eating disorder.

When to Use the Mini Meal

- The child is seriously unwell, possibly medically unstable, and unable to eat.
- The child appears dehydrated or hypoglycaemic, and immediate nutrition may improve their response.
- There is a family expectation that outpatient treatment will fail, and admission is inevitable.
- The child's physical condition necessitates eating to avoid hospital admission.

Clinical Rationale

The mini meal (sometimes referred to as the 'milk and biscuit test') helps assess whether hospital admission can be avoided.

Therapist Responsibilities

- Introduce and explain the rationale for the intervention calmly and clearly.
- Select the food (e.g., milk and biscuit), possibly offering two realistic options.
- Avoid negotiation-the food is not symbolic; it must be consumed.
- Model calm firmness and demonstrate to parents how to support eating without confrontation.
- Prepare a contingency plan, including:
 - Availability of paediatric beds.
 - Potential follow-up clinic visit the next day.
 - Immediate paediatric admission if necessary.

Common Pitfalls & How to Manage Them

1. Child Eats, Parents Feel Inadequate

Acknowledge the therapist's unique position. Validate parental concerns without judging competence. Use the 'goldilocks' approach.

2. Child Does Not Eat

Ensure the intervention is clinically justified. Choose a realistic food option. Be self-reflective-consider motivation and readiness.

Therapeutic Impact

Most children respond to calm firmness and will eat. Avoid praise; instead, offer brief empathy:

- 'That must have been really hard for you.'
- 'I think it was brave to face up to this.'

Express hope that this is a positive first step toward avoiding admission.

Benefits for Families

Builds trust and engagement. Demonstrates that the therapeutic team is proactive and responsive. Shows that the team is listening and responsive to the family's needs.