How Family and Friends Can Best Help a Loved One With An Eating Disorder
Michael E. Berrett, PhD

Psychologist, CEO, Co-Founder
Center for Change, Orem, Utah
Co-Author of APA Book
“Spiritual Approaches in the Treatment of Women with Eating Disorders”
1. Key Truths about Eating Disorders (EDs)

2. Why Do Some People Have Eating Disorders?

3. What is the Eating Disordered Client Experiencing?

4. What Families and Loved Ones Can Do to Help
Key Truths About Eating Disorders

- We need to be true learners
- What eating disorders are not
- What eating disorders are
- Most often there is co-occurring illness
- We/they need a new model of self worth
Why Do Some People have Eating Disorders

- It is complicated

**Risk Factors**
- Family History for eating disorders
- Family History for depressive or anxiety disorders
- Family History for drug or alcohol abuse
- High Body Mass Index (BMI) in early physical/sexual developmental years
- Early onset of menarche
Why Do Some People Have Eating Disorders—cont’d

- Personality Temperament:
  - Impulsivity
  - Perfectionism
  - Ruminative Worrying

- History of repetitive, excessive, extreme dieting
- Exposure to fashion industry, media, thin ideal
- Activities which pressure for specific body size
- Certain combinations of factors for some becomes the “perfect storm” for an eating disorder
What is the Eating Disordered Client Experiencing?

- Poor self esteem
- Loss of sense of spiritual worth and identity (disconnection)
- Progression: Self improvement attempt → Coping Style → Addiction → Identity
- Bio-chemical, neurotransmitter, hormonal imbalances
- Self becomes externalized and performance driven
- Self defeating model of self esteem: (western cultural model)
  - Appearance
  - Achievement
  - Approval
What is the Eating Disordered Client Experiencing? Cont’d

- Internal dialogue which is self degrading, relentless and “hell”
- Disconnection from “The Heart”
- Becoming “the exception” to good things from life and good things about self.
- Settling for the “consolation prize” (ED)
- Difficulty embracing love that is available
What Families and Friends Can Do to Help

- We cannot single handedly fix, cure, or save
- We must create a support system for ourselves
- MD, PhD, RD (Registered Dietician) who specialize in eating disorders makes an ideal team
- Learn all you can about eating disorders
- Support consistent and appropriate feeding/nourishment of the brain and body no matter the size of the client
What Families and Friends Can Do to Help—Cont’d

- Provide structure with food as needed. How much structure depends on...
- Create Structures for talking, connecting, activities and recovery efforts
- “Structure” is anything which makes it more difficult to engage in eating disorder behavior, and easier to not engage in eating disorder behavior
- Use your power and leverage to help them simplify their lives
- Quit blaming yourself for the eating disorder— it’s not your fault
- Make sure you take good care of yourself and continue to live your life
- Take ownership of your own weaknesses and struggles as an example
What Families and Friends Can Do to Help—Cont’d

- Look at intergenerational patterns which impact family members in negative or positive ways, and toward or away from eating disorders. Make changes as needed.
- Look at family rules about food, body image, societal image, and other direct or indirect expectations. Make changes as needed.
- Help them avoid avoidance (face fear one step at a time)
- Help them define your and others role in their recovery
- Diligently follow through in your role without apology
What Families and Friend Can Do to Help—Cont’d

- Ask them of your role in their accountability
- Assure they are accountable to someone
- Let them know of your expectation for complete honesty
- Teach them self correction versus perfectionism
- Become and stay engaged in their life. Don’t make it easy for them to push you away. Engagement is possible. Control of them or outcome is not possible. (Patch Adams Story)
- Have a voice. Speak with respect, but no need to walk on eggshells
What Families and Friends Can Do to Help—Cont’d

- Love them unconditionally. Express that love often and fully face to face and in writing (Dan Blackwells Book)
- Hold up the mirror of their goodness, spirituality, strength, progress, and success for them to see
- Avoid enabling the illness or becoming hostage to the illness
- Express your belief in them often. Give much kindness, encouragement, and hope
- Create opportunities where ED is discussed
- Create opportunities where ED is not discussed
- Disconnect love from achievement, teach and support a new model of self worth that includes intention, effort, courage, character, passion, purpose, and capacity
What Families and Friends Can Do to Help—Cont’d

- Create structures and take opportunities for deepening connections (daddy daughter dance, gratitude meeting etc)
- Let them know they are “more than enough”
- Help them verbalize their own positive thoughts and feelings about themselves, i.e. “How do you feel about what you’ve done...”
- Be the kind of example you want for them. Example is the most powerful intervention
- Help them have feelings without self judgment
- Listen to your “heart” and teach them to do the same