

Getting Help – Getting Better

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How do you choose a therapist? What should you expect from therapy?

One of the most important steps towards recovering from an eating disorder is recognizing that you need and want help. Often, individuals who experience eating disorders are ambivalent about seeking treatment. Many are terrified about the possibility of weight gain; others may feel anxious or confused about giving up patterns of behaviour, which have for so long helped them cope with stressors in their lives. Some have struggled in secret for years and are uncomfortable talking about personal issues or are embarrassed about their symptoms. And, unfortunately for many, the belief that their difficulties will somehow magically improve prevents individuals in real distress from having the opportunity to feel better about themselves.

Once you decide that you want treatment, how do you go about finding help? Aside from the National Eating Disorder Information Centre, there are other organizations and service providers that provide referrals to appropriate therapists, such as Canadian Mental Health Associations, community-based health centres, and your primary care provider. Ideally, a therapist will have experience treating eating disorders; however, large regions of Canada lack therapists with this experience, and while many healthcare providers now offer virtual services to expand access to care for people, for some, these services may not be affordable or suitable. It is important to ask a prospective therapist about their background in treating eating disorders. The therapist should be willing to tell you about the kind of approach they use and to provide a rationale for treating eating disorders with this approach.

Regardless of whether or not the therapist is a specialist in this area, they should be willing to explore your feelings and attitudes relating to food and your body. These are important issues for individuals with eating disorders and need to be addressed in treatment. Some therapists may not suggest strategies for changing your eating patterns and it may be extremely difficult to learn to eat normally on your own after years of chaotic or strictly regimented eating. In this case, it may be worthwhile to also work with a dietitian or nutritionist who can guide you in developing and implementing a plan for nourishing your body and healing your relationship with food. While medication can help an individual get over a tough period, antidepressants should generally not be the first treatment prescribed, nor should they be a replacement for dealing with underlying issues.

In choosing a therapist, it is important to consider how well you will be able to work with this person. It is often advisable to set up consultations with a few different therapists to help you to select the one who you feel most comfortable with. Do you trust the therapist; do you feel that you are working together toward common goals; can you talk about the issues that are most important to you? One of the ingredients of successful therapy is establishing

a good rapport with your therapist. Even if the therapist has an established background in treating eating disorders, you may not derive much benefit from their skills and experience if you are not at ease talking with them. Therapists vary in terms of their professional training and this may determine whether fees are charged for treatment. In Ontario, the only therapists whose eating disorder-specific services are covered by public health insurance are psychiatrists and other physicians who have completed in-depth training in psychotherapy (such as general practitioner – or GP – psychotherapists). This may not be the case in other provinces or territories. Many private health insurance plans include partial coverage for psychologists’ services; mental health services provided by regulated professionals (such as registered social workers or registered psychotherapists) may also be partially covered. The issue of fees should be discussed during your first contact with a therapist. You may need to think about how you are feeling about yourself and to measure this against whatever financial arrangements would be necessary to receive treatment. For additional guidance, see NEDIC’s [Tips for Choosing Professional Help](#).

It is vital to recognize that recovery takes time and there may be periods where it is difficult to notice any progress. Some individuals expect recovery to involve consistent weekly improvement. It is usually a “bumpy road” which involves progress punctuated by setbacks and frustrations. For progress to occur, both eating and psychological symptoms should improve over time.

Some questions to ask yourself to assess your progress include:

- have the episodes of binge eating decreased?
- have you been able to reintroduce foods that you had eliminated from your diet?
- have you been able to incorporate any new foods into your eating plan?
- are you able to break or let go of any food rules that you felt compelled to follow?
- are you feeling any better about yourself?
- has your weight changed; if it has, how have you been dealing with this?

It may have taken years for the eating disorder to develop. Although some of the symptoms may improve quite early, increased feelings of self-worth and greater trust in one’s judgments occur only over time.

Common obstacles

Giving up restrictive eating, or learning to eat normally, is necessary for recovery. This is often the most difficult obstacle to face because of the tremendous fear of weight gain. Many individuals with an eating disorder have no idea what “normal eating” is, and a lengthy period of chaotic or restrictive eating can lead to a loss of ability to recognize hunger and fullness. Research has shown it is important to deal with food and weight issues early in treatment and for the affected individual to begin to normalize eating. Unless this is done, the individual will continue to suffer from certain effects of starvation or malnutrition (which may include depression, anxiety, irritability, or obsession with food), which hamper the therapeutic process. Recovery can be frightening, particularly when it means identifying and addressing underlying issues. You are in therapy so the therapist can help you deal with these issues.

The unfortunate reality is, there are too few therapists specializing in eating disorders who are covered by the various provincial or territorial health insurance plans. If you have difficulty finding accessing therapy that is covered by your province or territory, paying fees for the help that you want may be worth considering. Some therapists offer reduced fees to individuals with severe financial constraints.

Giving up your “identity” as an individual with an eating can be an obstacle. Remember, though, that letting it go gives you the opportunity to develop a more positive identity.

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