

# Eating Disorders and Christmas Quick Guide

## **What are eating disorders?**

Eating disorders are mental illnesses with a genetic base. They are activated by anything that causes a caloric deficit or negative energy imbalance within a person who has the genetic predisposition to having one. If left untreated eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any psychiatric disorder. Eating disorders are not a choice, they are a mental illness. Eating disorders can affect any person, of any gender, any age, and any race.

## **Why is a person with an eating disorder scared of food?**

The eating disorder has affected the part of their brain that generates the fight or flight response (HPA) axis and makes it fire when they are about to eat food. This means that for a person with an eating disorder, the sight of food and eating is often as terrifying as doing something like jumping out of a plane or touching a poisonous snake.

## **Why is Christmas especially stressful?**

Eating disorders turn holidays such as Christmas into huge sources of stress for those who suffer from them. This stress can actually start a month before the holiday and build up as the day approaches. If the sufferer seems particularly uptight or standoffish during this time, understand this is not to be taken personally and it is merely a result of the eating disorder creating intense anxiety.

## **Key Points for Helping a Person with an Eating Disorder at Christmas**

- Understand that they are experiencing incredibly high levels of fear and anxiety and cut them some slack because of this. .
- Refrain from any diet or health and fitness talk.
- Refrain from any sort of fat shaming, negatively talking about gaining weight, or positive talk about losing weight. This includes talk about your own self, other friends or family, even celebrities. Enhancing the "thin ideal" that society projects is very dangerous when you are around a person who has an eating disorder.
- If the sufferer is working with a caregiver around meal support, do not intervene. The caregiver knows what is best, and it can be confusing for the sufferer if you challenge them. An example would be if the caregiver wants

the sufferer to eat more, and you voice your opinion “no, she/he has eaten enough, surely?” This gives the sufferer a mixed message and doesn't help.

- Eat well yourself. Seeing other people eat well acts as positive reinforcement that eating is okay and normal.
- Do not watch the sufferer eat, or pay any special attention to what they are eating unless you are a specific caregiver.
- Have compassion. While you may not understand why, know that the sufferer is experiencing great levels of fear, panic, and stress.

### **What should you avoid saying/doing?**

Unless the sufferer tells you otherwise, you should avoid the following:

- Any comments whatsoever about the sufferers weight.
- Do not tell them that they “look well,” or “look better,” or “look healthy,” instead, if you must compliment them on greeting play it safe by commenting on clothes or hairstyle. Steer clear from anything else.
- Never tell them they have eaten a lot or too much.
- Never talk about your most recent diet or exercise program.
- Do not talk about restrictive diets such as being vegan, gluten or dairy free, or avoiding certain food groups such as carbohydrates. This will undoubtedly trigger eating disorder thoughts for the sufferer.
- Never say after a meal that you feel like you have eaten too much — the sufferer will already be having their own post-meal anxiety and you will add to it if you say things like this.
- Avoid comments such as “I need to go for a run to work that off,” or “I feel bad after eating that chocolate.”
- About other people: do not make weight related comments such as “she looks so much better for losing weight.”

Eating disorders are very complicated mental illnesses. This quick guide is designed to be a very general tool to give to someone who is not a primary caregiver, but is a friend or relative of a person with an eating disorder.

Primary caregivers, partners, spouses, and parents of people with eating disorder can find much more in depth resources at [tabithafarrar.com](http://tabithafarrar.com). You can also email questions to [info@tabithafarrar.com](mailto:info@tabithafarrar.com)

## **Resources and further reading**

[Blog](#)

[Eating Disorder Recovery Podcast](#)  
[Recovery Guides](#)