

Let's Not Forget the Siblings

It can be easy to overlook siblings when you have a child struggling with a mood, anxiety, or eating disorder. This brief handout will review warning signs, defining sibling roles, and how to help.

Statistics and Research:

Maon, Horesh, & Gvion, (2020) reviewed the literature examining the quality of life of eating disorder patients' siblings suggested that 81% of siblings reported they were afraid their sibling with Anorexia Nervosa would never get better, and 43% were afraid their siblings would die.



This literature review found that some siblings blamed themselves for the onset of the eating disorder (ED) due to past comments, actions, or for not helping their sibling more.

With the dynamic shifts that occur with mental illness, siblings can be confused on what their role is and suggested that siblings can serve as “go betweens,” or mediators, between diagnosed siblings and parents, and playing a

supporting role for parents. They may feel pressured to carry out the expectation of “the healthy child” in the family by frequently emphasizing their achievements and concealing their struggles (McKenzie et al, 2018). Due to this combination, their difficulties could often be masked and neglected.

While research is still being explored in this area, some siblings reported higher levels of body dissatisfaction, issues eating or experimenting with eating behaviors, and feeling more self-conscious when compared to their peers.

Warning Signs:

- Personality changes (e.g., quieter, acting out).
- Only sharing the good (e.g., focusing on achievements, minimizing their needs).
- Increased focus on food, body image, etc.
- Observed depression and anxiety symptoms.
- Have received less parental attention than normal.
- Sleeping problems, lower energy levels, and difficulties with attention or concentration
- Decline in school, social withdraw, or expressing worry about the future

What is the Sibling's Role?

Siblings identified experiencing split loyalty to their parents vs. to their siblings which can evoke a persistent sense of guilt.

- Encourage them to speak to a parent if they are concerned about the affected sibling.
- Set expectations that they are not to be another parent or observer.
- What they can do is help by distraction at meals (e.g., play games, conversation, etc.) and engage in normal sibling activities.

How to Help:

- Have a conversation with them about what the new normal will look like, including expectations and what this will look like for them.
- Does the sibling understand eating disorders? Provide age-appropriate information and possibly have them join a family session with an ED professional.
- Incorporate frequent check-ins with sibling (e.g., how they are feeling, how their day went, etc.) and increasing time spent together when possible.
- Do not expect the non-affected sibling to adhere to the same meal plan expectations.
- Therapeutic intervention for the sibling may be helpful to guide them with common concerns revealed a sense of grief and sacrifice, as well as a feeling they lost their family, their normal childhood, their good relationship with their sibling, and their individual identity. Significant improvements in self-esteem and quality of life have been observed.
- Join ERC Parent Q&A days on Tuesdays at 3:30pm ET and 7:30pm ET
- FEAST resources: <https://www.feast-ed.org/what-about-the-siblings>

References:

- Karlstad, J., Moe, C.F., Wattum, M. et al. "Putting your own oxygen mask on first": a qualitative study of siblings of adults with anorexia or bulimia. *J Eat Disord* 9, 83 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40337-021-00440-6>
- Maon, I., Horesh, D., & Gvion, Y. (2020). Siblings of Individuals With Eating Disorders: A Review of the Literature. *Frontiers in psychiatry*, 11, 604. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2020.00604>
- McKenzie Smith, M., Pinto Pereira, S., Chan, L., Rose, C., & Shafran, R. (2018). Impact of Well-being Interventions for Siblings of Children and Young People with a Chronic Physical or Mental Health Condition: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. *Clinical child and family psychology review*, 21(2), 246–265. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-018-0253-x>