

# What to Do When Someone is Recovering from an Eating Disorder



*The Renfrew Center Foundation was established in 1990 due to the strong need for public and professional awareness regarding anorexia, bulimia and binge eating disorder. Today, the Foundation is dedicated to advancing eating disorders education, prevention, research, advocacy, and treatment.*

Many teachers, community leaders and families often ask Renfrew staff members, “What do you do when a fellow student, family member or peer<sup>1</sup> comes back after being treated for an eating disorder?”

*We created this two-part educational piece to help answer that question. This handout is for teachers, community leaders, families, and for those who may come in contact with her once she returns home or goes back to school or work.*

*Eating disorders are complex mental illnesses and it is best to learn as much as possible about the disorder to help her adjust back to school/work and to help educate her peers.*

*When dealing with someone recovering from an eating disorder, it can be difficult to know what to say and do to help her in the recovery process. This is a challenge because of the stigma associated with eating disorders and mental illnesses. Many incorrectly assume that eating disorders are a choice, a weakness, or just a matter of vanity.*

*Individuals being discharged from our treatment programs at The Renfrew Center often say, “I just want to be treated normally.” Often peers and family members “walk on egg shells” when the individual returns home because they are uncertain what to say or do to be helpful. However, it does get easier over time. The handout, on the back of this page, has some tips that teachers, leaders, peers and families can utilize to help make this process more comfortable for every involved.*

<sup>1</sup> Throughout the flyer we refer to the individual in recovery as a “peer” or use the pronouns her and she. Renfrew recognizes that men also struggle with eating disorders. The flyer is not meant to exclude men or boys.

**For more information, please contact The Renfrew Center Foundation  
at 1-877-367-3383 or visit [www.renfrewcenter.com](http://www.renfrewcenter.com)**



You might feel anxious about a peer returning to school, work or the community after being treated for an eating disorder. This is a normal feeling. Over the years we asked previous patients what they would want their peers to know and do when they return home. Some of these tips may seem silly or like common sense. To some extent, all adolescents and adults worry about some aspects of their bodies.

It is important to realize that people with eating disorders have heightened sensitivity around food, weight and exercise. Although she worked on these issues in treatment, no one who leaves a treatment program is “completely recovered” because recovery is a process. Your patience and understanding can be extremely helpful to the person in recovery.

AVOID	WHY?	INSTEAD, TRY...
“You look great.” “You look healthy.” “Now that you gained/lost weight, you look much healthier.” “You’re eating a lot better now.”	Comments about weight loss may or may not be taken as a compliment; comments about weight gain may be seen as criticism.  Focusing on how or what she is eating may make her angry and think that’s all you care about.	“I missed you while you were gone.”  “Let me catch you up on some things that happened while you were gone.”  “When I used to hug you my heart would break. I’m happy to see you stronger.”
Giving special attention to your peer.  Walking on egg shells around your peer.	She wants to feel as “normal” as possible when she comes back.	“If you want to talk about your experience while you were gone, I’m here for you.”
“You are so much pushier now.”	A big part of recovery involves learning to assert one’s needs. As a result, there may be times when your classmate asks you not to talk about food, exercise or weight around her; this doesn’t mean you have to avoid these topics all the time, but please be considerate and respectful of her requests.	“Thanks for the feedback. I get confused about what is and isn’t okay to talk about. It really helps when you tell me.”  “I love talking with you about (a band, TV show, etc.). You seem much more alive and interested in lots of things now.”
“I hate my body.”  “I just ate a huge meal. I need to go exercise it off.”  “I used to be a size 6; now I am a size 8. I’m a cow.”	Sometimes people unintentionally encourage behaviors that promote eating disorders by things they say or do. It’s important to watch your own behaviors.	“I’m not feeling great about my body today. Actually now that I think about it, I feel angry about breaking up with my boyfriend and I’m taking it out on my body rather than talking about it.”