

“Animal Models”

Common Reactions from Loved Ones of Someone with an Eating Disorder

Eating disorders not only have a profound effect on the sufferer but can impact heavily on friends and family that are close at hand. Undeniably watching someone you love and care about engage in harmful behaviours can be painful, and often difficult to understand. Difficult emotions such as fear and distress can often lead to expressions of anger or anxiety as the friend or family member feels frustrated and helpless for what to do. These worries can become even more overwhelming when a linked condition like type 1 diabetes with its long list of possibly devastating complications thrown into the mix. Often these impulsive reactions can lead to negativity and hostility, which ultimately can put up walls around the individual that needs help and feeds into the eating disordered mindset.

In 2007 Janet Treasure, Grainne Smith and Anna Crane had published *Skilled-based Learning for Caring for a Loved One with an Eating Disorder*. Part of this book details the use of animal metaphors that the authors developed to illustrate common behaviours that carers can display in reaction to a loved one with an eating disorder. These characterisations are outlined below alongside strategies for carers in how to manage these feelings. Additionally we will provide advice for sufferers of ED-DMT1 on how they can cope when faced with these familiar “animal model” type reactions.

The Kangaroo



Kangaroo care intends to protect the person with the eating disorder from upset and triggers, but this can prove to be problematic. Even despite any intention the carer or parent may find themselves accommodating the demands of the person with an eating disorder and therefore the demands of their illness as well. This can lead to increased isolation and lack of independence. The eating disordered individual may struggle the challenges of life and regular everyday tasks and interaction with other people. She or he can as a consequence become trapped in the role of infant just like a baby kangaroo enveloped in Mom's pouch. The message implied can be that the world is threatening and it is the carer's job to shield their love one from any potential harm.

Advice for friends and family: Step back a little. Let your loved ones fight for their own health and find out what they can do for themselves. You may see them flourish and if problems occur you can still be there to help them back on their feet again.

Advice for the eating disorder sufferer: Try to stress your need to ‘fly the nest’ and face your own challenges in life. This process may be hugely daunting at first but will become easier in time. However, make sure not to break away from support services and if you are in recovery do not feel you need to rush with the introduction of insulin and a controlled eating regime. Accepting more insulin after a history of omission always needs to be a gradual process in order to prevent the likelihood of relapse and flair up of worsening complications. It is okay to lean on your parents and friends to help you by as long as you also push yourself back into life and out of the eating disordered comfort zone.

The Rhinoceros



The rhinoceros can often be controlling and authoritarian. An accumulation of stress, frustration and exhaustion in concern for a loved one can lead to eruptions of temper akin to animalistic 'charging in'. Attempts may be made to change the eating disorder behaviour through confrontation and lectures. Not only can this be hugely upsetting and cause the eating disordered individual to react with hostility and defence but it is an approach that is bound to fail. A carer may believe that the eating disorder will understand and respond to logical arguments but the whole basis of mental illness is based on irrational beliefs. Even if the ED sufferer does appear to comply, this will usually just be a smoke screen without reliable foundations.

Advice for friends and family: Try to acknowledge that eating disorder beliefs are rigid and tightly protected. To avoid building resentments, let go of coercion and trying to force a change. You can say convey that you do not agree or accept the behaviour of the eating disorder but at the same time back off somewhat and recognise that what you perceive from the outset will be very different from what your loved one may be thinking and believing inside a mind that is constantly conflicted and at war with the disorder.

Advice for the eating disorder sufferer: Keep reminding yourself that often outbursts of temper or confrontation you may experience from a loved one are usually born from a place of great fear and worry for your well-being. Aim to be patient and try to be reasonable in meeting your friend or family members half way. If there is a calm occasion where you can sit down and try to explain how you feel you may be pleasantly surprised at the response. Honesty is so important in maintaining trust and preserving meaningful relationships. Don't let your eating disorder destroy those bonds because at the end of the day these are the people that truly love you and want you to be well. At its most ferocious and eating disorder just wants to kill you.

The Terrier



The terrier persistently, cajoles nags and tries to wear the eating disorder down to powerlessness. The downside of this terrier type behaviour is that either the sufferer tunes out to what they perceive as irritating background noise, or they may feel forced to feign compliance while covertly using negative compulsory behaviours. Caring motives are misunderstood and everyone's morale is sapped. Other aspects of mental health may become more prevalent if the eating disorder does not have room to breathe, as after all it is a coping mechanism and a crutch for the sufferer to endure life. Sometimes, the eating disorder itself can act like a terrier constantly criticising and barking at the sufferer inside their head, saying she/he is not good enough or needs to try harder.

Advice for family and friends: Listening and responding with compassion and sensitivity directed towards positive achievements is key. After all, what may seem to some people as small steps can in fact be huge feats when someone has been stuck in a certain routine and existence for a long time. Try to focus on praising the

sufferer's efforts and rather than the results, and let them know that a bad day does not erase the good days that may come before.

Advice for the eating disorder sufferer: Recognise that desperate words may commonly be said in the heat of the moment as a reactionary, impulsive response that is not truly meant. Often a loved one will push you to try and get some kind of reaction and recognition for the scope of your situation and it's potentially devastatingly risks, but for someone with terrier tendencies this reaction can be a kneejerk and comes simply not knowing what else to do. Your eating disorder is likely to use whatever it can as ammunition against yourself so try not to let it by instead acknowledging that the issue here is that of your parent or friends maladaptive habits. You already have your own battle to face without taking on theirs as well.

The Jellyfish

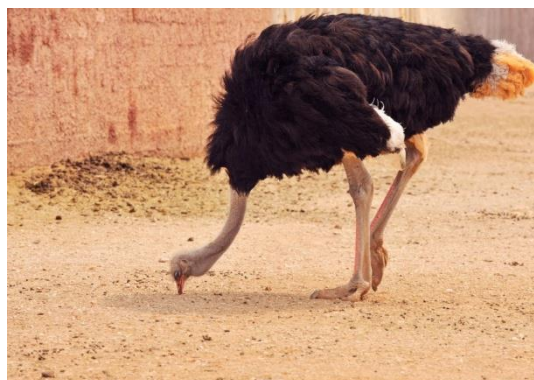


The jellyfish model is based on how family, friends and carers experience a heightened degree of emotions that can lead to them becoming overly sensitive about the eating disorder. This can be reflected by the way a jelly fish exists as a body contained within itself, adrift and lost in the water. For parents, this can come from a sense of misplaced guilt and self-criticism with the fear that poor parenting could have contributed to their son or daughters illness. It can mean that they become disconnected from playing a supportive role in recovery as they may find talking about the problem to be too distressing.

Advice for family and friends: Try to put aside your own anxieties and instead focus on being a rock for the person with an eating disorder to lean on if they need. Harnessing these feelings can take time and requires patience. Be kind to yourself as carers often need their own support to prevent complete burn out. Find your own outlet away from your family or friends circle where you can talk freely and offload in a safe environment, whether this is someone close to you or a professional therapeutic source.

Advice for the eating disorder sufferer: Be mindful of how your eating disorder impacts on those people around you, without turning this back on yourself in the form of self hate and bashing. Your loved ones may be negatively affected by your problems because they care for you and not because you ever aimed to deliberately do so. Let them have the space they need to process their own feelings.

The Ostrich



Typically the ostrich type carer attitude in coping with the presence of an eating disorder is to bury their heads in the sand. In response to panic it may feel easier to block out, ignore or underestimate the disorder in order to disconnect from the reality of it. This may lead to families or friends distancing themselves from the person with the eating disorder as well as not seeking help from professional services. They may implicitly or explicitly blame the person with the eating disorder and give the impression of, "It is your problem, not mine."

Advice to friends and family: Keep in mind that disconnecting will never solve the problem and may make the person with an eating disorder feel invalidated and alone. However hard it may feel, it is so crucial to tackle the issue head on and provide the support that is needed, while also seeking support for your own emotional distress at the same time.

Advice to the eating disorder sufferer: In being able to identify the 'ostrich approach' in friends and family you can hopefully learn not to take such behaviours to heart. Talking and being honest about your feelings is the one thing that may allow an 'ostrich' type to lift their head from the sand.

The following two examples are of positive animal models that people supporting someone with an eating disorder should aspire to:

The Dolphin



The dolphin model is gentle instead of extreme in the way that a rhinoceros or terrier may be. The friend or family member tries to nudge the person with the eating disorder to safety instead of trying to force her or him to give up the eating disorder. They will stand alongside and be there to provide support without dictating or making the situation about themselves.

The St. Bernard dog



Carers who are St. Bernard's have a calm and steady nature. They are warm, caring, consistent, available, and nurturing. A loyal and helpful St. Bernard is a good listener and provides empathy for the struggling person with an eating disorder. The St. Bernard approach can be hard to adopt when emotions are strong and a situation may be frightening but this type of attitude can certainly be learnt in time.

So, do you see elements of any of these animal models in yourself or your carers, parents or friends? How can you use recognition of these models to help in the way you cope with your eating disorder or the presence of such in a loved one?

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