

Understanding Relapses

You have a loved one who is battling an eating disorder. You want to do all you can to help this person, but find the recovery process difficult to understand. It seems your loved one is on the right track for a time and then relapses – a pattern that continues to occur. You wonder why he/she keeps reverting to self-destructive behaviors after experiencing a measure of freedom. While reasons for relapses vary greatly, here are some common ones.

1. Often, people have practiced food related behaviors for a long time and it takes time to change. Until they can learn new coping skills so that reverting to behaviors no longer seems necessary, they return to what has become comfortable to them.
2. Individuals give up a sense of control while recovering. Granted, in reality, the eating disorder is controlling them, but in their minds, they still believe that the eating disorder is the one thing in their lives that they can control.
3. They are filled with fear. They fear losing control of their food intake and gaining weight. They fear letting themselves feel their emotions and that they'll lose control of their feelings. They're afraid of letting everyone down. They appreciate everyone's support and are afraid they won't be able to stay on track without it once they progress in their recovery. Facing all of these fears on a daily basis is exhausting and they sometimes break under the strain of it all.
4. They haven't yet found their true identity. The eating disorder feels so much a part of them, they don't know who they will be without it.
5. They've been triggered in some way. Perhaps they were told their weight at an appointment after saying they didn't want to know what it was. Maybe a challenging circumstance occurred that brings about similar thoughts and feelings as those they experienced during the onset of the eating disorder. Well-meaning people may have made insensitive comments. They may have encountered trigger foods at an event. Perhaps they got caught up in comparison when hearing the weights of others or seeing others thinner than them.

As a friend or family member, your heart aches when your loved one stumbles. Perhaps understanding some of the common causes of relapses will help you reach out to your loved one more effectively. Maybe you'll have a better idea of what questions to ask and how you can be there to help him/her get back on track again.

Relapses are inevitable during the recovery process and can be difficult and discouraging for everyone involved. However, you can help your loved one learn something from the experience and move forward stronger than before.

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