

Eating Disorders and Social Support

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“In the process of recovery from physical or emotional illness, addiction, and specifically eating disorders, social support is the very ‘cradle’ in which recovery takes place.”¹ With eating disorders, the cradle metaphor is very apt. The love and support of a network of caregivers is crucial to a child’s healing and successful transition to adulthood.

The stress of living with an eating disorder takes its toll on the whole family network. The immediate family, in particular, needs support to handle emotions and develop coping strategies to see the child through illness, recovery and relapses.

Support can be found both online and in traditional face-to-face groups. Either way, social support groups tend to work co-operatively and can offer a

comprehensive approach to meeting cultural and social needs. This helps to create a sense of empowerment.²

At Family Services of the North Shore (FSNS), we have been running a support group open to parents, partners and friends of individuals with an eating disorder since 2007. The group runs twice monthly, and attendance numbers run anywhere from two to 15 people. In over three years, the group has

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These parents feel a lot of judgment. They judge themselves, and they get judged out in the world. They need a soft place to land, and this group provides that.

consistently been made up of parents, with only a few exceptions.

This group came to us fully formed. Two activist mothers of children suffering with eating disorders decided they were tired of not finding the support they needed for themselves. As the emotionally supportive figures in their families, they were exhausted

from constantly feeling bewildered and helpless in the face of their children's eating disorder. And they were tired of feeling the kind of blame for causing the eating disorder that used to typically be targeted at mothers.

These women reasoned that there had to be others feeling the same way, so began their own group. After

managing to create the group they wanted, they found it difficult to get the benefit they needed while having to be both participants and facilitators. They felt that the reputation and work of FSNS would be a good fit for the group, and we felt the group fit our mandate to provide self-help and mutual aid.

The FSNS support group: a soft place to land

In this support group, participants talk about exceptionally difficult topics. Where else can you say that you've put a lock on your fridge and kitchen cupboards, and get total understanding and acceptance from people who've "been there" too? Or that not only is your daughter suffering from an eating disorder, but now she's struggling with alcohol problems? Or that the eating disorder has caused her to blow her semester at university and she wants to come home, and you don't know if you want her home?

Parents can even find ways to laugh together at the kind of dark humour that can come from living with the 'whacked-out' reasoning of this disease. This is a disease that defies logic; in some ways, you have to live it to know. This disease can create isolation for families, because it can be difficult for others to comprehend that the reason someone is starving themselves has nothing to do with food. For example, the friend you generally trade good advice with may not be able to grasp the fact that what your family is up against is far more complex than just your too-thin child not making the "obvious" choice to eat more.

These parents feel a lot of judgment. They judge themselves, and they get judged out in the world—they've been blamed in various ways for their child's



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family services of the north shore

Family Services of the North Shore (FSNS) is an accredited not-for-profit community-based agency that offers education, support and counselling services. With the Jessie's Legacy program, the agency leads the provincial work in eating disorders prevention. Jessie's Legacy provides eating disorders prevention education, resources and support for BC youth, families, educators and professionals. FSNS is one of the seven BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information.

Family Services of the North Shore is expanding the work of Jessie's Hope Society to ensure that the provincial prevention work becomes Jessie's Legacy. Jessie Alexander was a young North Shore woman who died in 2002 of complications from a long-standing eating disorder.

Jessie's Legacy Eating Disorder Prevention Program

Offers phone and online support and referral
In the Lower Mainland call: 604-988-5281 ext 204
Toll-free for the rest of BC: 1-888-988-5281
E-mail: jessieslegacy@familyservices.bc.ca
Visit the website at: www.familyservices.bc.ca

illness. They need a soft place to land, and this group provides that.

This is not to say that it can't be difficult for a first-timer at the group. It can be very hard to arrive believing that your child will be fine because you've caught the eating disorder in its early stages, only to find parents who began the same way and have been struggling for years. It can be very hard, when you expect to hear about a cure, to instead hear members say, "If there was one thing that worked, we'd all be doing it. There isn't."

As one group member said, "I was so freaked out after my first time that I didn't come back for two years... but I'm glad I finally did." Over time, this woman has become one of the group's most valuable assets—its "elders."

These are parents who keep coming back—even though their child may be mostly recovered—to pass the wisdom they've gained on to parents who are just beginning the struggle.

Most of the information people in the group receive is from the "tried and true" experiences of other parents, which makes it invaluable. One of the strongest messages a parent will hear at the group is how crucial it is to take care of yourself. One can get lost in the sheer volume of demands: specialized understanding, medical visits, family dynamics and navigating changed relationships. With this constant focus on getting your child well, it's very easy to burn out. And one of the most helpful things you can do for your child is to model strength with your own self-care. If you make your own physical, emotional and psychological health a priority, when your child is ready to finally heal, he or she can look to you as an example.

Another more difficult message is that you don't have a lot of power to "make" someone else well, other than monitoring their need for emergency medical intervention. Becoming well and staying well has to ultimately come from them, and they often don't really want a lot of input from you. As is true with most things, advice needs to be sought in order to be of value. It can be a helpless feeling to know that your very sick loved one doesn't want the good advice you can provide.

What you can actively do, however, is to always let them know they are loved. With an eating disorder, the journey to health can be an intricate process. It is entirely likely that, as your loved one heals, your relationship will also be a part of this healing process. ▽

The Eating Disorders Support Group for Parents, Partners and Friends meets every second and fourth Monday of the month (except holidays) from 7:00 to 8:30 p.m. We meet at Family Services of the North Shore, Suite 101, 255 West 1st Street, in North Vancouver. The group is free, and everyone is welcome. To register, call Vicki at 604-988-5281 ext 202.



The advertisement features a logo for 'sanare' with a stylized bird icon above it. To the right of the logo, the text reads 'AWAKEN YOUR HEALING POTENTIAL with INTEGRATIVE ENERGY HEALING'. Below this, a paragraph describes the benefits of IEH treatment: 'IEH treatment helps in reducing pain and anxiety, relieving stress and depression, strengthening the immune system, reducing effects of trauma, detoxifying from substance misuse and reconnecting with the body.' At the bottom, contact information is provided: 'www.sanare.ca Tel: 604.727.4186 Marija Djordjevic #103 - 863 Richards St, Vancouver'.