

action
mental
health

Eating disorders support

Guide to self-caring with an eating disorder



Introduction

At Action Mental Health, we deliver eating disorders support to people throughout the Southern Health and Social Care Trust area. Working with a range of clients, many of them often talk about the difficulty of feeling guilty.

They feel guilty about being less productive, more emotional, moving less, having less energy, being hungrier – and even about feeling guilty.

They say that, “other people have it worse off than I do, so I shouldn’t feel guilty.”

It’s human for us all to have difficulties at times and we don’t need comparison in our tougher days. We are all wonderfully unique and experience life in many different ways. Recovery is a journey of learning how to ride the wave of the ups and the downs.

Your feelings are always valid, and you are always deserving and worthy of support. We can have our own struggles, and still have empathy for other people, one does not negate the other. Allow yourself to be human and know that your ability to feel all of your emotions only helps you to know and understand others better too. When we break the silence and seek support we can start to make sense of difficult experiences and develop skills that will help us manage and cope better – supporting us towards a brighter future where recovery is possible for everyone.

This guide will provide simple tips for self-care and encourage you to start showing yourself and/or a loved one some kindness and compassion at a time when you need it most.

How to self-care



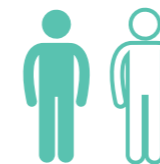
Adjust your expectations

Is it really fair to expect yourself to do the same amount of work that you would have done before, when you acquire additional caring responsibilities, a change of environment/circumstance and additional worries or concerns? Remember, you aren’t super-human and it’s ok not to be able to do it all. **Delegate and share responsibilities if you need to. You are not selfish for needing extra support. Focus on your basic human needs.**



Concentrate on the here and now

Focus your mind on what you can control day-by-day e.g. getting enough sleep, who you talk to in the day, nourishing your body, taking time to do something that comforts you. **Mindfulness Apps like Headspace can help with this.**



Stop comparing yourself with others

Comparison is the thief of joy. We’re all unique, with different strengths and abilities, so our experiences of life will all be very different. **Do what works and feels good for you.**



Celebrate the small wins

You can do this by practicing daily gratitude. For example, note down three things you’re grateful for or are glad that happened that day – it doesn’t matter how big or small. If you made it through the day, got out of bed or gave your body nourishment, it all counts. **Just focus on what you can do.**

How to self-care



Share kind words

Words of kindness can bring a sense of comfort and safety, basic human needs that can help to reduce stress and anxiety. It's important that when you say something kind to others that you also remember to do the same for yourself as well. Start to talk to yourself the way you would to someone you love. Why not create three affirmations for yourself which you can read over on a regular basis – or even better, stick a note on your mirror as a daily reminder. **It could be something like: "I am loved... I am strong... I am capable."**



Take a self-compassion break

Take 5-10 minutes to yourself and acknowledge how you are feeling. This can be done by putting your hand over your heart and naming your emotion/s. For example, "I am feeling..." Take a minute to breathe and sit with this feeling, not judging it, simply letting it be and then offer yourself some compassion: "May I be kind to myself;" "May I accept myself as I am;" "May I be patient with myself." **By doing this, you're giving yourself permission to feel and move through your emotions in a way that feels safe without becoming overwhelmed.**



Create a comfort list

Create a list of things you can do that will bring you comfort. It can be helpful to base these around your senses.

- ▶ **Sight** - a folder of comforting photos or quotes on your phone.
- ▶ **Sound** - a comforting playlist or sounds from outdoors.
- ▶ **Smell** - fresh coffee, perfume, candles, essential oils.
- ▶ **Touch** - walk barefoot on the grass, wrap yourself in a warm blanket, give yourself a hug!

You can also include activities that you find comforting, for example, colouring-in, reading, playing with pets, sorting out a drawer in the house, washing the car. **Doing any of these things with the intent to bring yourself comfort is an act of self-care and kindness.**



Focus on movement that feels good

At times we can hear unhelpful messages around working out. If this is creating pressure or guilt for you when you're engaging in exercise then this is not healthy. Ask yourself what will feel good for your body today. Some days, that might mean resting, while on others, it might mean getting outdoors for a walk or having a dance and enjoying some music. Exercise should be a celebration of what our body can do, never a punishment. **Focus on what feels good.**



Clients' top tips on what helps during recovery



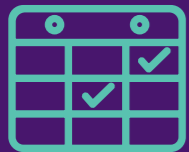
Set a daily intention

"My eating disorder thrives when I have no sense of purpose. When I can at least just focus on one thing that I can do, it can quiet my mind a bit. It could be organising something in the house, calling or texting a friend or taking the dog for a walk. I try to make my intention realistic and achievable rather than creating a to-do list that feels overwhelming. One thing at a time, one step at a time."



Do some mindful movement

"Make some time for moving throughout the day in a way that feels good for your body and which has nothing to do with how you look or what you weigh. Identify what your body needs right now – whether that's taking a rest, stretching, or doing a little dance in the kitchen with your loved ones."



Create a routine

"Structuring your day can help to reduce anxiety, while having a routine for eating and scheduling it into the day normalises it as a daily thing you do to look after yourself, like brushing your teeth. Your mind and body need food no matter what, so it's important that this is prioritised as part of your routine. It's also important to focus on routine rather than rules, as rules come with pressure and obligation – and often negative emotions, if one is broken."



Let it be

"Sometimes we get so caught up in the doing, when what we actually need is to just let ourselves be. Be still. Be connected. Be allowed to feel what we have to feel. Although this can sometimes be scary, it helps to have something to channel these feelings out into, whether that's a journal, or a trusted person you can talk to."



Get out of your head

"One of the hardest parts of an eating disorder is that all-consuming conflict in your head. It can disconnect you from the people and things you care about and lead to distorted thoughts and difficult feelings. One thing that helps with this, for me, is to use tools to help bring me back into the room, like grounding tools. Simple often works best, like deep belly-breathing techniques, a simple body scan to release tension from head to toe, or 5,4,3,2,1 – which draws your attention to your senses and the things around you. (Where you name five things you can see, four you can hear, three you smell and so on)."



Self-care starts with kindness

"The way you speak to yourself, the simple ways you meet your needs, or even considering how you comfort yourself. Create a comfort list and get into the habit of regularly choosing something off it to do. Although these might be simple things that you sometimes do without thinking, acting with the intention of choosing comfort has a much bigger impact. Things you might include on your comfort list could be – choosing a favourite mug to enjoy a hot drink in, sitting in a comforting spot in the house, a collection of images on your phone, or a comforting music playlist."





Clients' top tips on what helps during recovery



Self-care means sometimes saying 'no'

"As a chronic people-pleaser, I used to think the only way I could get self-worth was from what I could give to others. Always saying yes and being at their beck-and-call, even if it meant that my own needs were suffering. I've learnt that saying no isn't selfish, it's self-preservation. It's looking at my own energy resources and considering the impact saying yes might have on me. Saying no can be an act of self-care and it allows me to prioritise my needs as well. Also, saying no might mean that I have more time to say yes to the things that I need for myself."



Self-care is being present with my dogs

"My dogs have been such a help during recovery. Caring for them has reminded me what it takes to care for myself – that I need the same attention, connection, patience, safety and support from food that they do. They are a great grounding tool too and even on the hardest days can bring a bit of laughter and joy with the simple and spontaneous way they see the world and play."



Check in with yourself

"I used to find it could be weeks or months before I had actually checked in with myself. Self-care for me is making time to ask myself how I'm doing. I try to do this regularly through a journal prompt I learnt at Action Mental Health: 'I think... I feel... I need.' This is simple and doesn't take long, but it means I'm caring about myself enough to see what sort of day I've had."



Create a gratitude jar with family

"This massively helped during recovery! Eating disorders can create a lot of conflict and it can be easy to get caught up in fighting the eating disorder and lose sight of the things we do love and appreciate about each other. In our gratitude jar we wrote simple things we appreciated about each other that week. It could be things about yourself, too. On tough days, the jar then also was a useful reminder of things that could be good."

Dealing with bad body image days



Be mindful of social media

Social media can encourage unhealthy comparison between ourselves and seemingly 'perfect' others. Be aware that not everything we see online reflects reality.



Challenge your inner critic

Practice reframing those negative thoughts. For example, if you think 'my tummy is too big,' try coming up with a positive thought replacement such as, 'my tummy contains life sustaining organs that need space to function.'



Practice body gratitude

What are you grateful for your body about? Think of all the things it does for you.



Body image fluctuates

Remember, how you feel is not permanent.



Write it down

Journaling can be a healthy outlet for your emotions.



Be kind to yourself

Create a comfort list of simple things you can do to offer yourself a moment of kindness (e.g. music/activities). If you find kindness too difficult, then using neutral comments can also be helpful. For example: *"I have a body, but it does not define my worth."* *"I am more than my appearance."*



Talk to yourself as you would to a friend

What advice would you give them if they told you they were struggling with the way they look?



Breathe

Mindfulness is a great way to connect with your body and develop a greater appreciation of it. There are lots of free apps, such as Headspace and Oak, that can help with this.



Further information and support

If you think that you might have an eating disorder or are worried about your relationship with food, your body image, or your exercise habits, please speak to your GP. It's very important to access treatment as early as possible, as earlier intervention means a greater chance of fully recovering from your eating disorder.

Great organisations for more information:



Providing counselling support in Northern Ireland and specialist eating disorder support for individuals and carers in the Southern HSCT

amh.org.uk



Supporting individuals and carers across the UK

beateatingdisorders.org.uk



Supporting Individuals and carers in NI

eatingdisordersni.co.uk



Helping families fight eating disorders

Supporting carers in NI

fghted.org



Supporting Individuals and carers in NI

linkscounselling.com



Supporting men and families in NI

thelaurenctrust.co.uk

**If you are in crisis, please contact Lifeline on 0808 808 8000
or by Text phone on 18001 0808 808 8000.
Trained counsellors are available by phone 24/7.**

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