Eating Recovery Center · Pathlight Mood & Anxiety Center

# Validation & Communication

## Strategies for Supporting Your Loved One and Yourself

**"Your feelings, thoughts, and wants make sense, given what you're going through. "**That's what validation says. And if what you're already doing is working, keep doing it.

## Why feelings get in the way

**Big emotions take reasoning offline**
When feelings surge, we get "kicked downstairs" from the thinking brain to the reactive brain. Many people with eating disorders are "super-feelers" who get there quickly and often.

**Avoiding feelings will backfire**
Going around a painful feeling, often by using eating disorder behaviors, brings quick relief but strengthens the pattern. Experiencing the emotion now makes it feel more manageable the next time.

**Your calm builds the staircase**
You act as a temporary co-regulator while your loved one's own skills grow. Showing care calms the nervous system even if the words aren't perfect.

## What validation is

| Validation is | Validation is not |
|---|---|
| Listening to understand | Agreeing with the eating disorder |
| Naming the feeling underneath | Approving of behaviors |
| Showing you see their perspective | Fixing it right away |
| Staying calm and present | Giving in or dropping limits |

## From but to because

"I can understand why you might feel / think / want ___ because… because… because…"

**"But"** cancels what came before it
**"Because"** builds understanding

**Validate** the feeling, not the eating disorder's message

## Validate first, then problem-solve

**1. Validate**
Say "I can understand why… because…" a few times

**2. Emotional support** *Pick one*
Comfort, reassurance, understanding, positive regard, belief in them, togetherness, or space *(offered warmly, and you follow up again later).*

**3. Practical support**
"Why don't we…?" Proceed with the plan, distract, teach a skill, or set a limit. Sometimes validation is enough.

## A mealtime moment: "I can't eat this. It's too much."

**Validate**
"I can imagine this feels really scary, because food has felt unsafe for a long time."

**Support**
"I'm right here with you. I know you're doing your best."

**Practical**
"Let's take a few slow breaths, then start with the first bite."

**Hold the limit**
"The meal plan still stands, and I'll stay with you."

## When validation is hardest

| YOU MIGHT HEAR | TRY… |
|---|---|
| **Anger:** "Leave me alone! You're ruining everything!" | "I can understand why you're so angry, because it feels like you have no control right now." |
| **Hopelessness:** "Nothing is ever going to change." | "I can understand why this feels hopeless, because you've worked so hard and you're exhausted." |
| **Shut-down:** Silence, shrugs, "I don't know." | "I can imagine it's hard to find words, because this is a lot. No pressure. I'm here." |

*If you're "downstairs" too, pause and breathe first. If they push back, stay curious ("Help me understand"), try again later, and repair if you slip.*

## Find your caregiving style

| Too much | The balance | Too little |
|---|---|---|
| *Jellyfish: Openly distressed* | *St. Bernard: Warm & calm* | *Ostrich: Avoids emotions* |
| *Kangaroo: Overprotective* | *Dolphin: A guide* | *Rhino: Controlling* |

*Most of us shift under stress. Notice it and steer toward the middle. Fear and self-blame are normal and ease with support.*

## Contact the team right away if…

- They talk about hurting themselves or not wanting to live
- You're worried about physical safety, like fainting or chest pain
- Behaviors suddenly escalate, or you feel unsafe

In an emergency, call 911. In the U.S., call or text 988.

# Validation & Communication

## Validate the person, not the illness

Don't agree with the eating disorder's message or argue with it. Validate the pain underneath. Answering reassurance questions feeds the cycle, so ask the team what language to use.

| THE EATING DISORDER MIGHT SAY | TRY THIS... |
|---|---|
| "I'm disgusting. I hate my body." | "I can hear how much pain you're in, because that feeling is so heavy. I'm here." |
| "Tell me I didn't eat too much." | "I can see how scary this feels, because eating has felt unsafe. I can't talk the fear away, but I'm right here with you." |
| "I'm not sick enough to need this." | "I can understand why it feels that way, because you're so tired of this. I'm staying with you, and I trust your team." |

## Validation in action

**A parent might hear**

*"I don't want to be here. This isn't helping."*

*Respond with*

"I can understand why you feel that way, because this work is exhausting and it's hard to see progress while you're in the middle of it."

**A partner might hear**

*"I feel like such a burden to you."*

*Respond with*

"I can understand why you worry about that, because you've felt so much guilt about needing help. I'm here because I want to be."

**A sibling or friend might hear**

*"You don't get it. Just leave me alone."*

*Respond with*

"I can understand why you want space, because talking is hard right now. I'll be close by whenever you're ready."

## Emotional support *Pick one*

| | |
|---|---|
| Comfort | A hand, a hug, or loving words |
| Reassurance | "It's going to be okay." |
| Understanding | "I hear you. I understand." |
| Belief in them | "I believe you can do this." |
| Togetherness | "We're in this together." |
| Space | "Let's take a few minutes and try again." |

## Then, practical support

Only once your loved one feels understood:
"Why don't I / we / you..."

- Proceed with the plan
- Suggest a distraction: a walk, music, a movie
- Teach or practice a skill
- Gradually face a fear, with support
- Set a limit, kindly and firmly
- Nothing more: sometimes validation is enough

## What to say and what to skip

| INSTEAD OF | TRY... |
|---|---|
| "Just eat. It's only a sandwich." | "I can see how hard this is. I'm right here with you." |
| "You look so healthy!" | "I'm glad we're spending time together. I've noticed how hard you're working." |
| Comments on weight, size, or food. | Talk about interests, values, and things you enjoy together. |
| "Why can't you just stop?" | "I can't fully imagine what this is like, but I want to understand." |

## Your role at each level of care

**INPATIENT**
Your calm presence and validation on calls and visits matter most.

**RESIDENTIAL**
Practice "because" statements on calls, visits, and passes.

**PHP**
Evenings and weekends at home make meals and transitions real-life practice.

**IOP**
Plan for stress points and validate before problem-solving.

## Caring for a caregiver

"What if I make it worse?" "It hasn't gone well in the past." **There's no such thing as an unmotivated support person,** only one motivated to protect their loved one from something worse. Fear and self-blame ease with support: pause before responding, remember an imperfect try still shows care, and lean on the team

This week, pick ONE thing to try: a "because" statement, a pause, or a swap.