

# KNOW! How to Create Healthy Holiday Traditions

The holidays can be a stressful time for many people. While holiday foods and meals may be a highlight of the season for many, this aspect of the holidays can trigger stress, anxiety, and emotional strain for those who struggle with eating disorders or negative body image.

About [9% of the US population](#) will have an eating disorder in their lifetime. Eating disorders can affect anyone, regardless of gender, race, sexual orientation, age, weight, or background. You may know that a loved one is struggling or has struggled with an eating disorder. There may be people in your life struggling silently.

Regardless of whether you are aware of a loved one with an eating disorder, you can support anyone who may be struggling during this holiday season by modifying your behavior to reduce weight stigma and avoid diet culture. Because weight stigma and diet culture are ingrained into many aspects of our lives, we often do not notice the ways in which we perpetuate them. It's important to recognize that [weight stigma is a risk factor](#) for depression, low self-esteem, and body dissatisfaction and that young people who diet are [more likely to develop an eating disorder](#) than those who do not diet.

To help create a healthier holiday environment for anyone in your life struggling with an eating disorder or negative body image, here is some helpful information to follow:

## Be Mindful of your Language

The language surrounding dieting and weight can be anxiety-inducing for anyone struggling with an eating disorder. While it may seem normal to talk about eating too much, feeling fat, gaining weight, or going on a diet after the holidays, these kinds of comments can be a trigger for those with a history of an eating disorder. Try to avoid using this language yourself and change the subject if dieting and weight become the topic of conversation. This may be difficult and uncomfortable but doing so can help to change the norm within your family and support anyone who is feeling anxious about the topic of discussion.<sup>2, 3, 6</sup>

## Choose Compliments Wisely

When we see family and friends for the first time in a while, it's common to comment on their physical appearance. However, no matter how well-intended, these kinds of compliments can bring up difficult feelings for those

who are in recovery from or actively struggling with an eating disorder. Comments like "You look great today!", "Wow, have you lost weight?", and "You look so healthy lately." may seem normal, but can be received as positive reinforcement that may strengthen an eating disorder. Comments like this may make the person feel like they are succeeding and should continue whatever they are doing to appear that way, no matter how unhealthy.

Instead of commenting on people's bodies or physical appearance, focus on their style, how they make you feel, or something special about them that you treasure. Some examples include "I always feel better after talking to you.", "Being around you makes me happy", and "You're an amazing parent/sibling/child." You might even find that these types of compliments are more meaningful to you and the person you are complimenting.<sup>3,6,7</sup>

## Don't Just Focus on Food

Food and eating are central to many holiday traditions but can unintentionally induce stress for anyone struggling with an eating disorder. You can help your loved ones feel included by planning activities and creating new holiday traditions that don't involve food. Making holiday crafts, playing games, or watching a movie are great ways to spend time with your family and loved ones that don't trigger or involve an eating disorder.<sup>2,3,6</sup>

## Model Healthy Behavior

Young people pay attention to and pick up on the way that you interact with food and your body. Set a positive example of healthy self-esteem and a balanced relationship with food. Choose to talk about yourself with appreciation and value yourself based on goals, talents, accomplishments, and character rather than how you look. Avoid associating not eating much with "being good" and eating a lot with "cheating" or "being bad." For the holidays, remember not to "save up" ahead of a big meal, as this encourages food restriction. Instead, model consistent eating habits to ease anxiety around meals.<sup>2,11,12</sup>

## Offer your Support

If you know that you have a loved one that is struggling, offer them your support. Ask how you can help them cope with the holidays and plan ahead of time to help minimize their anxiety around meals. Show them that you are a safe person who can help them navigate these difficult situations and let them know that they can always

ask for support when they need it.<sup>1,2</sup>

If you do notice the [warning signs](#) of an eating disorder, including skipping meals, making excuses for not eating, focusing obsessively on healthy eating, or adopting an overly restrictive diet or exercise plan, take them seriously. Don't discuss your concerns in a big group or at the dinner table. Instead, wait until you're in a private, safe, neutral, and comforting space. Use "I" statements like, "I noticed you haven't been eating much lately and I'm worried" to express your concerns with care. Your loved one may deny there is a problem, so keep the door open for future conversations. Talk to your pediatrician or an eating disorder specialist if you are concerned. Early intervention is the best way to reduce the chance of chronic illness.<sup>3,11</sup>

### Feel free to check out these resources!

- National Eating Disorder Association (NEDA) Helpline: Call or text (800) 931-2237
- National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (ANAD) Helpline: Call (888)-375-7767
- In crisis? Text "NEDA" to 741741
- [Find a treatment provider](#)
- [Eating Recovery Center Resource List](#)
- [NEDA Help and Support](#)
- [Treatment Information](#)
- [NEDA Parent Guide](#)

### Sources

- [1. Eating Disorders and Developing Healthy Holiday Traditions](#)
- [2. Eating Disorders and the Holidays](#)
- [3. Eating Disorders and the Holidays: Helping Loved Ones Cope](#)
- [4. Statistics & Research on Eating Disorders](#)
- [5. Four Tips for Managing Triggers During the Holidays](#)
- [6. NEDA Parent Guide](#)
- [7. Compliments and Eating Disorders](#)
- [8. Body Image and Children](#)
- [9. 6 Tips to Get Through Thanksgiving](#)
- [10. Eating Disorder Prevention](#)
- [11. Developing Positive Body Image](#)
- [12. What Can You Do to Help Prevent Eating Disorders?](#)

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