

Validation

for parents of an adolescent with anorexia nervosa

What is validation?

- Validation is the *recognition* and *acceptance* of a person's experience as understandable. You can validate yourself or others.
- Validation is rooted in empathy, but additionally involves conveying that you understand the emotional states that you or others are experiencing.

When to use validation?

- Validation is nearly always (or always) useful. However, when your adolescent is experiencing a strong negative emotion it can prevent emotions going high and avoid unproductive conflict.
- It can be very helpful around mealtimes (before, during and after) when your adolescent is feeling very anxious.

Why use validation?

- Validation helps young people understand the different emotions they experience, why they occur, and how to handle them (Gottman, 1997).
- Validating your child's experience will help to improve your relationship over time and support their own emotional development and capacity to regulate their emotions.
- Validation can help your adolescent more effectively problem solve but is not aimed at finding solutions.

Mealtimes vs. other times?

- The validation required at mealtimes early in treatment is typically focused on letting your adolescent know you recognise and understand they are struggling, even though you may need to be quite firm with finishing a meal
- Engaging in problem solving during mealtimes can often lead to unhelpful negotiation or avoidance of the meal. This is something you need to watch out for and focus on in between meal times.
- Validation outside of mealtimes is more likely to lead to you supporting your adolescent to problem solve solutions to their difficulty.

Quick Reference: 6 Steps to Validation

- 1 Be *aware* of adolescent's emotions
- 2 Recognise emotional times as opportunities to connect
- 3 *Take a moment* to collect yourself if needed
- 4 Listen *empathically* and be curious without judgement
- 5 Verbally *label* emotions and experiences
- 6 OPTIONAL: promote *problem-solving* if needed (mostly outside of mealtimes)

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Step-By-Step Guide

1. *Be aware of your adolescent's emotions*

- Be aware that YP will be extremely anxious, particularly before during and/or after meal.
- Anxiety linked to eating is probably at its highest before your child starts eating. During a meal the anxiety level might vary. YP with anorexia nervosa most often feel guilty and angry after eating a meal.

2. *Recognize emotional times as opportunities to connect*

- Your child needs you most when sad or angry or afraid.
- Helping young people feel understood when upset leads to improved trust.
- Ability to soothe upset young people is when you feel most like a parent
- Acknowledging emotions helps adolescents learn skills to soothe themselves and manage their emotions more effectively in the long term.
- Addressing less intense feelings or topics gives you a chance to practice listening and problem-solving when stakes are small.

3. *Pause and collect yourself if needed – DO NOT MISS THIS STEP*

- Being calm yourself is key to ensuring you are helpful for your young person.
- If you need a moment – take it and do whatever you need to do to be able to be fully available for your young person (e.g. splash some water on your face, take a deep breath, go outside for a brief moment etc.)
- Staying calm and firm will help YP to manage their emotions more easily. Make sure you are able to manage your own anxiety, frustration and anger, especially during mealtimes. Take a break if it gets too much for you. Ask your partner, or any other significant adult to share the burden with you.
- If you are in the middle of a meal, don't feel able to leave the table and do not have anybody else to call upon, remember you can always take a break or call a 5-minute time out. Pausing a meal is not the same as stopping a meal or saying your adolescent doesn't need to eat it.

4. *Listen empathically and be curious without judgement (this is harder than it sounds and requires constant practice)*

- You can listen to and soothe your child in 3 ways:
 1. With your **words** (what you say)
 2. With the **tone of your voice and your body language** (the way you say it, your facial expressions, your gestures and body posture)
 3. **Physically** (e.g. hug, holding hands, etc.)
- Pay attention to your child's body language, facial expression and gestures.

- Really listen to how they respond to you and the words they use to describe their experience. Be curious without imposing your own ideas.
- Don't discount feelings, don't tell them how they should feel, or that they should use logic, or try to fix it right now.
- Don't get into "anorexic discussion" and don't use logic to reason with anxiety stemming from anorexic cognitions. Connect with the suffering without getting caught in the discussion.

Mealtime specific tips:

- Remember to keep bringing it back to the meal if your child stops eating.
- Use distraction during meals
- Remember being hostile or critical usually does not work
- Remember giving up too early makes things worse for the subsequent meals
- Know your limits and have exit plans.
 - These might include making sure your partner is with you for the whole meal, 'tag-teaming' with a partner if not with you, taking breaks but not calling an end to the meal, having a friend on standby for support, etc.
- Ask for help from your partner or extended family or close friends if you are in high distress
- Stay compassionate if placing consequences for meal not eaten
- Listen to your child and continue to validate their distress
- Calmly ask them to continue eating when they slow down, or stop

5. *Connect with and label your adolescent's emotions*

- Find words for what your adolescent is feeling – give examples (anxious, angry, guilty).
- It is best if you can support them to label the emotion themselves, however this may not be possible, especially during a difficult meal and early in treatment
- During mealtimes early in recovery, this might simply involve you as parent labelling that they are struggling/it is hard/they are suffering. Your adolescent may not be able to voice it themselves. This is ok.
- You can tell your child it is okay to feel 2 ways at once

6. *OPTIONAL: Begin problem-solving after adolescent feels understood, and usually outside the mealtime – "connect before correct"*

- Listening and validating is often all your child wants and needs.
- Problem solving does not take a difficult emotion away it just means it can be tolerated differently.
- When adolescents are less preoccupied with their anorexic cognitions or rejecting less parental support during mealtimes, parents can more easily

problem solve what happens during the mealtime. This usually happens outside of the mealtimes.

- Discuss – problem solve with them outside of the mealtime what was in your support during meal times that helped ease their anxiety and guilt e.g using distraction, having radio on, watching a TV program during meals, playing cards, having conversation not related to food and eating etc
- As we give adolescents more responsibility to participate in the problem solving, around mealtime they will be more likely to have trust in you during mealtime.

Common Pitfalls

1. Discounting, invalidating, interrupting, giving evidence, logic or arguing facts.
2. Wanting to fix the problem quickly. Sometimes listening, empathising, but continuing to firmly and consistently support your child to eat and finish their meals is all that you need to do to help your child handle his/her feelings and finish their meals.
3. Offering reassurance immediately because your child is in pain and suffering.
4. Getting fed up because mealtimes continue to be very difficult. Your child's difficult feelings during mealtimes will continue to persist for a while and will probably get more intense especially at the start of treatment. If you get stressed out yourself go back to step 3.

!! IMPORTANT !!

*Validating your adolescent's feelings **does not** mean that you **agree** with your adolescent or **would feel the same way** in their situation. Nor does it mean that you **approve** of your adolescent's behavior and there should be no consequences. Validating just means you heard your adolescent and understand what they are saying.*

*Validation is also **not reassurance**. There will be many times when your young person will need to feel and work through some very difficult emotions. As a parent you cannot take away these feelings but you may help them tolerate them by validating. Offering too much reassurance at these times may mean your child might not learn how to deal with it effectively.*