

Caring styles and responses to the eating disorder: animal models

Eating disorder symptoms frequently lead carers to react in particular ways. It is understandable that responses can be the source of hostile or critical confrontations occurring in all relationship settings. Unfortunately, such responses may result in the sufferer feeling increasingly alienated and stigmatized and retreating into the comfort of eating disorder behaviour even more.

Our team at the Maudsley have devised a series of animal metaphors (jelly fish, ostrich, kangaroo, rhinoceros, terrier) in a light-hearted manner to explain how these automatic reactions can be unhelpful. A veritable menagerie emerges as we metamorphose from one animal state to another in a desperate attempt to remedy the situation. Some 'animals' may be the carer's default way of coping with stress. Each animal analogy may be your default way of coping with stress or part of your natural temperament. Carers frequently swing from over-protection to logic or become overtly emotional or avoidant. In order to change these responses, you may have to challenge yourself and experiment with trying out new responses which do not feel natural or spontaneous. Don't worry if you do not succeed at first. Try and remember to keep looking to the bigger picture. All practice attempts are an experiment. Experiencing you experimenting with change will help your loved one.



The jellyfish **Too Much Emotion and Too Little Control**

Some carers may be unable to regulate their own intense emotional responses to the ED. Their distress and anger is transparent to all, this gives the message that this carer needs looking after and at the very least needs to be treated with kid gloves. In this sea of emotion it is hard to steer a clear path. Also, like a jelly fish overt anger and anxiety can exert a poisonous sting with the same uncontrolled emotions being mirrored by the sufferer. Unfortunately, this serves to strengthen the eating disorder hold. The downside is that these 'sad and mad' emotions escalate causing tears, tempers, sleepless nights and exhaustion in all parties.

It can be hard to regulate your emotional reaction if you hold some false interpretations about the eating disorder, or have high levels of self blame, or perfectionist expectations about your role as a parent. It is also hard to regulate emotions when you are tired, tense and stressed. Ask yourself the following questions in two ways, as yourself and as if you are a kind compassionate friend looking on at yourself.

- Reflect on your jellyfish tendencies. How do they make you feel?
- What are the effects of these responses on yourself? On others?
- How important is it that you work on your 'jellyfish' responses?
- What message about the world does a 'Jellyfish' response give?
- If you were advising a friend with the same problem, what would your advice be? How would you
- help them take the step to change their jellyfish behaviour?
- What beliefs do you need to work on in order for this change to happen?
- How can you protect yourself from getting total emotional burn out?
- When could a jellyfish response be helpful?

Brainstorm scheduling some fun into your life and ways to nurture yourself. This may be through a hobby, seeing friends or taking a walk whilst listening to music. Try writing your ideas down and

then timetable this relax and recharge time into each day. Another plus side to this approach is the sufferer will learn to find ways of coping when you are away. The fact that you are reading these worksheets shows that you are open to new ideas.



The ostrich **Avoidance of Emotion**

The ostrich finds it hard to cope with the volcanic situation which often arises when trying to tackle the difficult problem of living with an eating disorder. Emotions and the complexities of human behaviour are too chaotic and confusing. The ostrich literally prefers to put his/her head down into the sand. This is something he/she knows he/she can confidently do, avoiding what seems too hard. The downside is that the sufferer may misinterpret this approach, seeing you as uncaring and end up feeling unloved. Self-esteem is sapped away. Additionally, the concealment of emotions sets an unhelpful example for the sufferer to follow. Setting an example of emotional honesty and spreading the concept that having controlled emotions is normal and acceptable human behaviour, will aid the sufferer in coming to terms with their own difficulties with emotional expression. Living with others who can and are able to convey their feelings with words will aid the sufferer in changing their only way of articulating their own emotions which currently is through food.

Ask yourself the following questions and also answer these questions as if you are a kind compassionate friend looking on.

- Reflect on your ostrich tendencies. Have they succeeded in helping you and those you love feel safe and secure?
- Could you take steps to become less of an ostrich?
- What message about the world does an 'Ostrich' response give?
- Who can support you in experimenting with new responses and help you reflect on how you are doing in this non-ostrich role?
- What would you want this person to do/say? A list of suggestions is often useful.
- What do you think about involving others in helping you make the prerequisite changes?
- How do you feel about making these changes? Are you ready to take the baton and run with it?
- Which of your Ostrich tendencies do you feel are helpful?

Change can be difficult and uncomfortable. It may be worthwhile engaging the help of a supportive family member/friend to help you in your quest. Think about your own self-esteem and how role modeling confidence in facing rather than avoiding difficulties might help your loved one experiment with changing their own behaviour. The fact you are reading this sheet and considering these questions is already a huge step. Well done!



The kangaroo **Trying to make everything right**

This type of carer does everything to protect by taking over all aspects of the sufferer's life. They treat the sufferer with kid gloves, letting them jump into the kangaroo pouch in an effort to avoid any upset or stress. The downside of this type of caring is that your loved one fails to learn how to approach and master life's challenges. She/he only feels safe living in this limbo land suspended in a child-like cocoon unable to visualise taking on the world in all its colour or the mantle of adulthood.

Ask yourself the following questions and also answer these questions as if you are a kind compassionate friend looking on.

- Reflect on your kangaroo responses. How are they working for you?
- What difficulties are you encountering? Give an example of what is not working for you?
- What message about the world is a 'Kangaroo' carer giving?
- What aspects of your kangaroo behaviour can you experiment with?
- How important is it for you to address some of your kangaroo responses?
- Think back to one of your kangaroo behaviours in recent weeks. How can you change that behaviour a little? What would be the first step?
- Which parts of your 'Kangaroo' behaviour do you think are helpful?

Change is tough... congratulate yourself after having attempted the change! Taking safe risks is a key aspect of change. You may need to make the change with baby steps.

The rhinoceros uses force and logic to win the day

Fuelled by stress, exhaustion and frustration, or simply one's own temperament, the rhino attempts to persuade and convince by argument and confrontation. The downside is that even when your loved one does obey, confidence to continue to do so without assistance is not developed. In fact the more likely response to a rhino "in a china shop" is to argue back with an even stronger eating disorder voice. An outcome of this is that, for example, the more the ED minx retaliates, the more the Eating Disorder identity is consolidated, embedded and validated.

Ask yourself the following questions and also answer these questions as if you are a kind compassionate friend looking on.

- Reflect on your rhinoceros responses. Are they working for you?
- What difficulties are you encountering?
- What message about the world does a 'Rhinoceros' carer give?
- How can you avoid these obstacles?
- What might be the positive and negative repercussions of changing your rhino response? ,?
- What can you do for yourself to lower your anxiety, stress or anger levels?
- Set a goal for yourself with regards to this. How do you think this will make you feel?
- Which Rhino behaviours do you think are helpful?

Whilst contracts work in a 'crisis situation', try to motivate and encourage your loved one to grow their own garden of independent thinking by letting them make decisions and come up with innovative solutions

Remember that the more you argue for change, the more resistance you are likely to face and you will give the sufferer the opportunity to practice arguments for the statusquo. This allows the eating disorder to embed itself more deeply. A key skill is allowing the sufferer the opportunity to present her/his own arguments as to why change is needed.

The terrier uses persistence (often perceived as criticism)

The terrier persistently , cajoles, nags and tries to wear out the anorexic minx or the bulimic boa constrictor. The downside of this terrier type behaviour is that either the sufferer tunes out to what they perceive as irritating white noise, or gives the opportunity for covert negative counteracting behaviours. Caring motives are misunderstood and everyone's morale is sapped. Your loved one loses the inner resource to face the rich tapestry of life without an eating disorder identity.

Ask yourself the following questions and also answer these questions as if you are a kind compassionate friend looking on.

- Reflect on your terrier tendencies. How do they make you and the family feel? Are they working and helping Edi feel safe enough to leave eating disorder?
- What are the effects of this terrier response on yourself? And on others?
- How important is it that you work on your 'terrier' type behaviour?
- If you were advising a friend with the same problem, what would your advice be?
- How can you develop rewarding communication? A key skill is trying to listen to what Edi might be struggling to say?
- What beliefs do you need to work on in order for this change to happen?
- How can you take steps to be an active listener?
- Speed and timing are factors you can consider. The fact that you are reading these worksheets shows that you are open to new ideas. Well done!
- What specifically can you do now to get started with these different patterns of responding?
- Which terrier behaviours do you think are helpful?

The eating disorder is rather like a terrier constantly criticising your loved one - saying she/he is not good enough, needs to try harder. Role modeling active listening and reflection with compassion and sensitivity directed to the positive will help her/him have the support and encouragement to challenge the eating disorder voice.

Practice praising the sufferers efforts rather than the results.

Close your eyes and visualize yourself as being kind, warm, compassionate, a good listener, having the best of caring motives—what animal would this be?

Create a picture in your mind of a 'ROBUST and RESILIENT' person – what qualities would they need to have to weather the 'Slings and Arrows of Outrageous Fortune'?

Inspirational Animals

Of all the animals in the animal kingdom, we want you to aspire to be a St Bernard for warmth and compassion in the face of danger and a Dolphin for its wisdom and hands off form of support.



The dolphin

Just enough caring and control

An optimal way of helping someone with an eating disorder is to gently nudge them along. Imagine your loved one is at sea. The eating disorder identity is his/ her life vest. She/he is unwilling to give up the safety of this life vest whilst living in the frozen wasteland of the eating disorder. You are the dolphin, nudging her/him to safety, at times swimming ahead, leading the way, showing them new vistas, at other times swimming alongside with encouragement, or even quietly swimming behind, showing trust and confidence.



The St Bernard

Just enough compassion and consistency

Another optimal caring response is one of calmness, warmth and compassion. This involves accepting and processing the pain resulting from what is lost through the eating disorder and developing reserves of kindness, gentleness and love. The St Bernard instills hope in your loved one that they can change, that there is a future full of possibility beyond the eating disorder. The St. Bernard responds consistently and is unfailing, reliable and dependable in all circumstances. The St. Bernard has a good antennae attuned to the welfare and safety of those who are lost...calm, warm and nurturing.

Pearl of Wisdom

Nobody gets it right all of the time – in challenging times it is important to remember the adage, “every mistake is a treasure” and as Martin Luther King said; “You don’t have to see the whole staircase – just take the first step”.

We aren’t expecting carers to be perfect at all times. Just 5 -10 minutes a day of constructive interaction with an emphasis on listening pays dividends.

Good enough care helps the sufferer to tolerate compromise, compassionately.