



Finding Your Way Back to Yourself

A Supportive Guide for Clients Navigating Anorexia Nervosa

This handout was created with deep compassion for the journey you are on. Recovery from anorexia nervosa is not linear, and it is not about perfection — it is about gently, courageously returning to yourself, one moment at a time. You deserve nourishment, rest, and peace.

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"Healing is not a destination. It is a practice of returning — gently, again and again — to your own worth."



Understanding Food Restriction

Food restriction in anorexia nervosa is not simply about food — it is often the brain's attempt to manage overwhelming emotions, establish a sense of control, or respond to deeply held beliefs about worth and safety. Understanding what is happening in your body and mind can be the first step toward compassionate change.

What Happens in the Brain & Body

- **Energy deprivation affects thinking.** When the brain is undernourished, it becomes harder to think flexibly, feel emotions fully, or see options beyond restriction.
- **The starvation cycle reinforces itself.** Restriction lowers mood and increases anxiety, which the brain interprets as a signal to restrict more.
- **Hunger cues become muted.** Over time, the body suppresses hunger signals to adapt to low intake, making it hard to feel or trust hunger.
- **Fear pathways become overactive.** The brain begins to associate eating with danger, making even small amounts of food feel threatening.
- **Physical symptoms emerge.** Fatigue, difficulty concentrating, feeling cold, hair thinning, and heart irregularities are signs the body needs more fuel.

The Restriction Cycle



Breaking this cycle is possible — and it begins with small, supported steps rather than dramatic changes.

Common Thoughts That Fuel Restriction

"If I eat this, I will lose control completely."

"I don't deserve to eat unless I've earned it."

"Eating less means I am disciplined and strong."

"My body cannot be trusted."

"If I feel full, something is wrong."

These thoughts feel very real — but they are symptoms of the illness, not facts about you.



Gentle Nutrition Tools & Strategies

Recovery does not ask you to love food overnight. It asks you to take one small step toward nourishment — and then another. These tools are meant to support you gently, not to add pressure.

Honoring Hunger — Relearning Your Body's Signals

- **Check in every 2–3 hours.** Even if you don't feel hungry, ask: "When did I last eat?" Set a gentle reminder if needed.
- **Notice physical cues without judgment.** Lightheadedness, difficulty concentrating, irritability, or feeling cold can all be hunger signals when appetite is suppressed.
- **Start small and build.** If a full meal feels impossible, a small snack is still nourishment. Any step toward eating is a step toward healing.
- **Eat with support when possible.** Sharing a meal with a trusted person can reduce anxiety and help eating feel safer.
- **Avoid long gaps between eating.** Waiting too long increases anxiety around food and makes restriction feel more compelling.

The Fear Food Ladder

A fear food ladder is a tool used in therapy to gradually approach foods that feel frightening. You and your therapist build this together — starting with foods that feel only slightly challenging and slowly working toward more feared foods over time.

STEP 5	Most feared foods — approached last, with full support
STEP 4	Challenging foods — practiced with coping tools ready
STEP 3	Moderately feared foods — practiced regularly
STEP 2	Slightly uncomfortable foods — practiced with support
STEP 1	Foods that feel manageable — start here

Meal Support Strategies

- **Use distraction during meals** — a podcast, gentle music, or a TV show can reduce the intensity of mealtime anxiety.
- **Have a post-meal plan.** Decide in advance what you will do for 30–60 minutes after eating to help manage urges to compensate.
- **Practice opposite action.** When the urge to restrict is strong, try eating something small — even if it feels wrong. The feeling will pass.
- **Avoid food rules when possible.** Rules like "only eat before 6pm" or "no carbs" maintain the disorder. Work with your therapist to gently challenge these.
- **Be kind to yourself after difficult meals.** A hard meal is not a failure — it is evidence of your courage.



Understanding Compulsive Exercise

Exercise is a natural and healthy part of life — but in the context of anorexia nervosa, it can become compulsive, driven by guilt, anxiety, or the need to compensate for eating. This is not a character flaw. It is a symptom of the illness, and it is something that can change.

Joyful Movement vs. Compulsive Exercise

Joyful Movement	Compulsive Exercise
Feels energizing and enjoyable	Feels obligatory or driven by guilt
Can be skipped without distress	Skipping causes intense anxiety or guilt
Flexible — adapts to how you feel	Rigid — follows strict rules regardless of how you feel
Done to feel good in your body	Done to punish the body or compensate for eating
Respects illness, injury, and rest	Continues despite illness, injury, or exhaustion
Enhances connection with others	Becomes isolating or secretive

Warning Signs of Compulsive Exercise

- Exercising even when injured, ill, or exhausted
- Feeling intense guilt, shame, or anxiety when unable to exercise
- Using exercise to "earn" food or "undo" eating
- Exercising in secret or lying about the amount of exercise
- Feeling that your worth or safety depends on completing a workout
- Increasing exercise duration or intensity to feel the same relief
- Prioritizing exercise over relationships, work, or rest

What Compulsive Exercise Does to the Body

- **Increases caloric deficit** — worsening malnutrition even when eating has improved
- **Stresses the heart** — an already-weakened heart is put under additional strain
- **Increases cortisol (stress hormone)** — maintaining anxiety rather than reducing it
- **Delays physical recovery** — muscles and bones cannot repair without adequate rest and fuel
- **Reinforces the eating disorder cycle** — exercise becomes another form of restriction

Rest is not laziness. Rest is medicine. Your body heals when you allow it to be still.



Moving Toward Recovery

Recovery is not about becoming a different person. It is about returning to the person you already are — the one who deserves nourishment, rest, joy, and connection. These tools can support you on that path.

Self-Compassion Practices

- **Speak to yourself as you would a dear friend.** If a friend told you they had eaten today, you would not criticize them — offer yourself the same kindness.
- **Acknowledge the difficulty without judgment.** "This is really hard right now. It makes sense that I am struggling."
- **Place a hand on your heart.** When distress is high, this simple gesture activates the body's calming response.
- **Write a compassionate letter to yourself** — from the perspective of someone who loves you unconditionally.
- **Practice the "good enough" meal.** A meal does not have to be perfect to nourish you. Imperfect eating is still eating.

Coping Statements for Difficult Moments

When the urge to restrict is strong:	<i>"My body needs fuel to think, feel, and heal. I can take one small step."</i>
When guilt after eating arises:	<i>"Eating is not something I need to earn or undo. I am allowed to be nourished."</i>
When compulsive exercise urges are high:	<i>"Rest is part of recovery. My worth is not measured by my output."</i>
When the eating disorder voice is loud:	<i>"This voice is a symptom, not the truth. I can hear it without obeying it."</i>
When progress feels slow:	<i>"Recovery is not linear. Every small act of nourishment matters."</i>

When to Reach Out

- You are feeling physically unwell, faint, or experiencing heart palpitations
- You have not eaten anything in 24 hours or more
- Thoughts of self-harm or suicide are present
- You feel unable to stop exercising even when you want to
- You are feeling hopeless about recovery



You do not have to navigate this alone.

Sage & Sol Therapy offers compassionate, trauma-informed support for eating disorders, anxiety, and women's wellness. Reach out anytime.

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