



HOW TO HANDLE THE ANOREXIC/BULIMIC CHILD
IN THE FAMILY –

(Some advice to new families from
other parents in Troy, N.Y.)

DON'T

1. Do not urge your child to eat, or watch her eat, or discuss food intake or weight with her. Leave the room if necessary. Your involvement with her eating is her tool for manipulating parents. Take this tool out of her hands.

2. Do not allow yourself to feel guilty. Most parents ask: "What have I done wrong?" There are no perfect parents. You have done the best you could. Once you have checked out her physical condition with a physician and made it possible for her to begin counseling, getting well is her responsibility. It is her problem, not yours.

3. Do not neglect your marriage partner or other children. Focussing on the sick child can perpetuate her illness and destroy the family. The anorexic must be made aware by your actions and attitudes that she is important to you, but no more important than every other member of the family. Do not commiserate; this only confirms the child in her illness. She knows you love her.

4. Do not be afraid to have the child separated from you, either at school or in separate housing, if it becomes obvious that her continued presence is undermining the emotional health of the family. The final separation is death; don't allow her to intimidate the family with threats of suicide.

5. Do not put down the child by comparing her to her more "successful" siblings or friends. Her self-esteem is a reflection of your esteem for her. Do not ask questions such as, "How are you feeling," or "How is your social life?" She already feels inadequate, and questions only aggravate the feeling.

DO

1. Love your child as you should love yourself. Love makes anyone feel worthwhile.

2. Trust your child to find her own values, ideals and standards, rather than insisting on yours. In any case, all ideals are just that . . . only ideals. In practice we fall short, too; our own behavior is adulterated with self-serving rewards.

3. Do everything to encourage her initiative, independence and autonomy. Be aware though, that anorexics tend to be perfectionists, so that they are never satisfied with themselves. Perfectionism justifies their dissatisfaction with themselves.

4. Be aware of the long-term nature of the illness. Anorexics do get better; many get completely well, very few die. But families must face months and sometimes years of treatment and anxiety. There are no counsellors or psychiatrists with the same answer to every case. A support group such as a parents self-help group may make a significant difference to your family's survival; it helps you to deal with yourself in relation to your anorexic child. You must make the child understand that your life is as important as hers.