

My Top Tips for Restrictive Eating Disorder Recovery

By Emily Spence

This guide contains the full collection of my 'Top Tips in Recovery' posts. By bringing them together into one easily accessible resource I hope to share what I've learnt in my journey to help others and raise awareness of eating disorders and the recovery from them.

No. 1

Identifying and Honouring Mental Hunger

1. If you're thinking about food/meals/meal plans/if it's ok to have lunch at 11am/what your sister is sat eating/what birthday cake you'll have next year/what you would order at your favourite cafe if you were there right now/what the crisps would have been like in that packet you just noticed on the floor etc then YOU ARE HUNGRY. Eat. Seriously! Just eat.

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2. Eat the thing that you thought of first because that is what you are actually craving. The “maybe you should have XYZ instead” is your ED mind-set trying to hold you in a place of restriction. Listen to your body, trust the signals that it's sending you and eat what YOU want.[SEP]

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[SEP]3. Know that mental hunger is JUST as important as physical hunger. I would never have recovered if I hadn't followed my mental hunger.

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[SEP]4. Tell someone what it is you're thinking about. Voice it -> Own it -> Eat it![SEP]

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^[1]_{SEP}5. If you're thinking about LOADS of different things at ones; feeling like your brain is flitting from pizza to ice cream to bread to cake to nachos to chocolate, then try this. Start with one of them, any of them, and go from there. If you finish it and still want something else (likely AND normal) then just get that too. Don't let your ED paralyse you in the 'I don't know what I want stage'. Pick something you're thinking about, and remind yourself that you can have as much of all those things as you like, whenever you want them, and this phase of recovery will not last forever.



No. 2

Combatting ED Number Obsessions

1. Make a pact with yourself not to look at the nutritional information/calories on things and if you do, pick the higher option. Teach your brain through your actions that the smallest number isn't important to you anymore.

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^[1]_{SEP}2. Bin the scales. All of them. And whilst you're at it, all the other measuring utensils you use for disordered purposes too. You don't need to weigh yourself and you don't need to weigh, measure or portion control your food. Go cold turkey on the compulsion and show your brain that numbers, measurements and portions don't matter.

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^[1]_{SEP}3. Get yourself some stickers to put over the nutritional information on packaging. I found this super helpful in the early stages where I felt like my

brain was so hard wired to look and study the numbers that I felt like I'd do it without even deciding too. Block them out and make it harder for those neural pathways to fire.^[SEP]

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^[SEP]4. Ask for blind weigh ins at medical appointments.^[SEP]

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^[SEP]5. Go to restaurants/cafes that provide no nutritional information ANYWHERE. Not on their menu, not online, nowhere. Give yourself no choice BUT to pick irrespective of numbers.



No. 3

Extreme Hunger

1. Know that you are not a freak/the only one/broken/going to be a life-long binge eater/addicted to food. Your body needs the food it's asking for. Trust it.

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2. Get yourself a decent sized biscuit tin/food tub, fill it with the foods your craving and make it your recovery hungry tub. I used to fill a big old biscuit tin with all sorts of different chocolates, biscuits, cake bars and sweets. (BONUS TIP: if calorie counting/ food number obsession is something you struggle with then scrap the packaging and just pour all your favourites into the tub- you can do this yourself or get someone else to help you. Remember: your body is not a

calculator; you do not need to micro-manage it). Then whenever I fancied something from it I would take the whole tin, sit down and have whatever I wanted from it. The tub helped me own my hunger and it stopped me spending ages just staring into the cupboard trying to work out what to have when actually I just wanted everything. Own it. Honour it. Beat it.

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3. Don't torment your body with little portions on a plate. Take the whole pack and show your brain that food is no longer scarce.

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4. Keep having your normal meals and snacks around your extreme hunger. I found that having three meals and three snacks every day NO MATTER

WHAT helped to combat the 'oh you ate loads at lunch you don't need anything for the rest of the day' ED thoughts. For example, no matter how big my morning snack ended up being due to my extreme hunger I would still, ALWAYS, have a proper lunch.



5. REST; Let your body use the food to repair and restore itself. Compensating for extreme hunger by movement or any other means only prolongs the process.

No. 4

Weight Gain and Body Changes

1. Bin sick clothes. You are bigger than ED you in every single way. Own the extra space that you take up. And show yourself in your actions that 'going back' is not an option.

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2. Don't body check. Put on your clothes and go.

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3. Wear baggy, loose fitting clothes that make you feel safe and comfortable. Have some 'couldn't-care-less-what-I'm-wearing' outfits but also make sure you have some options that you know make you feel nice about yourself. We've all

been there: the days where you feel like shit and you kind of want to look like shit to match. And that's cool... we all need scruffy jogging bottoms and t-shirts with holes in for those days. But don't feel confined to those clothes: get yourself some baggy, comfy stuff that also makes you feel nice; t-shirt dresses, leggings, oversized tops with cute logos and phrases for example. Some days you will want to be in recovery AND look nice so get yourself a few options for those kind of days too.^[1]_{SEP}

^[1]_{SEP}4. Post-it note positive affirmations all over the place... especially in places you usually struggle. Mirrors, bathrooms, kitchen cupboards, you name it. It can be nice to also keep some in your purse or pockets- ideal for clothes shopping trips!^[1]_{SEP}

^[1]_{SEP}5. Avoid places, things and people that make you focus on your body and its physical appearance. You are so much more than your body and right now you need to surround yourself with positive vibes and body neutrality. Unfollow unhelpful accounts on social media, quit anything that makes you feel crap about you and avoid friends that 'don't get it'.



No. 5

Resting, Exercise and Lower Level Movement

1. Sit down. No really. Sit. Down.^[SEP]

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^[SEP]3. After eating make a rule that you will be still for at least half an hour. This was a game changer for me.

^[SEP]4. Remind yourself of why it's important for you to be resting right now. You are not your friend/sister/dad/husband so whatever they do with their bodies is irrelevant to what you do with yours. You do not NEED to walk the long way. You do not like hovering THAT much. You can 'get fresh air' without going for a run. You don't care that much about your friend's workout regime. Spot the ED bullshit, call it out and remember; you are recovering from a restrictive eating disorder and rest is an essential part of that process.^[SEP]

^[SEP]5. Avoid the quasi trap of eating more but only because you're moving more. Have you suddenly started running? Have you out of nowhere got an intense urge to start lifting weights and getting strong? Stop. Exercising is not your 'new identity', that's just your eating disorder in a new coat, and you don't need to 'get strong' right now, your body knows how to make the muscle it needs, give it some respect and let it heal.^[SEP]^[SEP]6. Ditch the fitbit/calorie counting app/fitness tracker. You. Do. Not. Need. That. Bullsh*t. In. Your. Life.



Self-discovery in Recovery

1. Journaling can be incredibly empowering but don't be afraid to find a method that works for you. It could be that you prefer a hand written diary or maybe you prefer typing it up on your computer/phone. Either way, remember that there is no wrong way to do it; anything that helps you express YOU can be beneficial. Working through my This is Me journal (as shown in the photo) was what helped me the most. It guided me through my self-discovery journey and allowed me to get creative in the process which I absolutely loved (who doesn't love stickers haha 😊).

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2. Talk to loved ones about who YOU are: the things you like, the things you're passionate about, your goals and your dreams. Verbalising your self-discovery journey is powerful.

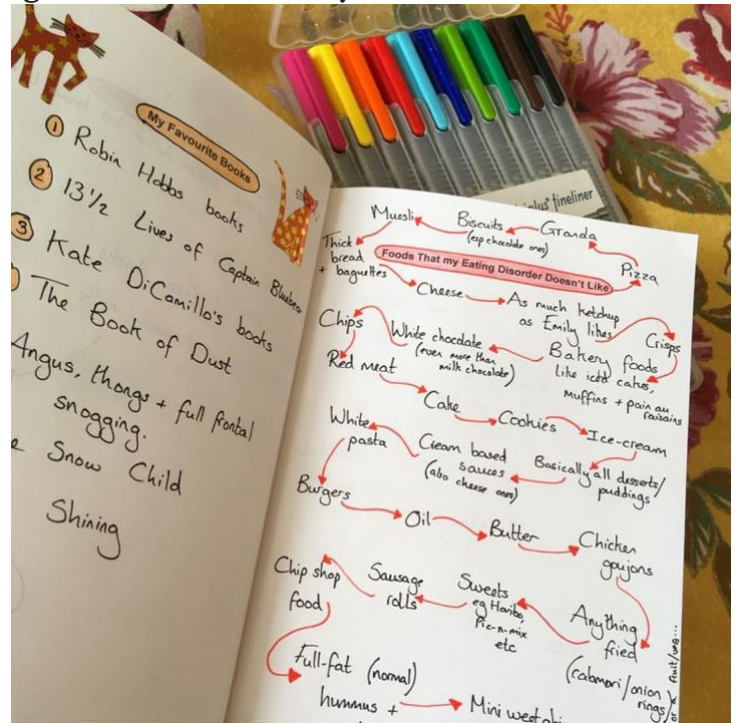
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3. Say yes more. Within reason of course haha! Basically be open to trying new things and see what those things teach you about yourself. Recovery means saying goodbye to your ED identify and hello to the real YOU. Embrace that person and see this time as an exciting opportunity to grow, learn and explore.

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4. Remember not to get lost in the big stuff. Self-discovery isn't all about life-changing realisations; the little things are just as important.

5. Don't worry about being 'all about food' now. Go with it. Your brain NEEDS you in this place to heal and restore. You, your hobbies and the rest of your life are on the other side of this. Keep going.



No. 7

Bloating, Gas and Other Tummy Troubles

1. Gassy? Don't be embarrassed; it's totally normal to be more gassy than normal during recovery! Your body is working hard to heal and this is part of the process. Open a window, laugh a little, explain that this is part of recovery to friends/family (people who care will understand and probably just laugh with you) and embrace your bodies journey to health restoration.

2. Wear soft, baggy clothes; I found trousers/shorts/skirts with loose waist bands and loose, flowy dresses particularly good.

3. Lie down and rest. Allow your body to focus on healing.

4. A hot water bottle or microwave beanie can really sooth a troubled tummy.

5. Eat regularly (and enough) to help rebuild that army of digestive enzymes you need for a strong, healthy gut. Oh, and go easy on the fruit and veg.



No. 8

Weird ED Behaviours

1. Don't be ED-delusional. YOU do not only like that one specific bowl. YOU do not HAVE to serve your own food. YOU do not enjoy strolling around supermarkets. YOU do not love watching people eat on Youtube 24/7 and reading cook books it not YOUR new favourite hobby. These are all ED driven behaviours. YOU are hungry. Eat.^[SEP]

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2. Let go of the control: get your mum to cook breakfast for you, swap menus with your recovery buddy and order for each other, ask a friend to grab you a random snack when out, let your partner choose everything you're eat for a day etc. Let go. Break out of that shitty, restrictive prison.^[SEP]

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^[SEP]3. Identify the behaviours, separate them out from the real, happy, healthy, free YOU and release yourself from them by challenging them head on. Treat them the same as you would a fear food: Identify. Separate. Slay!^[SEP]

^[1]_{SEP}4. Change it up! Keep your ED on its toes by constantly changing things. Never have the same meal two days in a row. Stop clock watching- eat at different times of the day. Have a different breakfast every day of the week. Use different cutlery and crockery. Try new things when eating out. Buy at least one TOTALLY new thing every time you go food shopping. Eat your meals all over the place at home- not just 'your' seat.^[1]_{SEP}

^[1]_{SEP}5. SHOW your brain that food is no longer scarce. Fill your fridge and cupboards. Order more than you think you'll eat (you can always have the leftovers tomorrow). Ditch the tiny plated portions- embrace WHOLE packets. Rather than taking multiple little slices of cake, take a HUGE slice (or, as I often did, the whole thing) and own your hunger. Keep snacks in your bag/pockets/car/locker etc. Honour ALL your hunger in such a way that SHOWS your brain that food is plentiful.

No. 9



Food Shopping and Eating Out

1. Take a recovery buddy. Someone who at the supermarket can notice the stuff you look at hundreds of times but keep putting back, challenge you on it and put in the basket because they know that YOU know you want it even if right now it's tough. Someone who in a restaurant or café can encourage you to order the thing that you REALLY want. It needs to be someone you trust but also someone who is not afraid to piss off your ED.



2. Avoid food shopping when hungry. Eat something as you go around or just before: this made a huge difference to me. The same applies to eating out: don't let yourself get super hungry beforehand, go into the (potentially) challenging situation strong and clear-headed, not hungry, fuzzy and weak. Set yourself up for success.

3. Challenge yourself to try new things. ED loves routine: change things up as much as possible!

4. Throw out all your 'safe' foods and fill your home with the foods your ED fears. By doing this you're making it harder to slip back to disordered choices and easier to make pro-recovery decisions.

5. When it comes to eating out try to combat the ED's control obsession head on by going to places with absolutely NO nutritional information anywhere. It might seem terrifying at first but by going to places with no numbers on the menu, no 'low-XYZ' options and no website with nutritional breakdowns to obsess over you are asserting YOU and neurally rewiring all that ED bullshit.

6. Don't overthink things. Act impulsively, before your ED mind-set has a chance to butt in. See it, want it, get it. YOU have what YOU want. End of.

No. 10

Letting Others Help

1. Remind yourself that you deserve the love and support of others. Allow yourself to be helped. This is a tough journey and it is ok to struggle.

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2. Find yourself a recovery buddy. Someone you're close to who is honest, understanding and has a good relationship with food and their body. Someone who 'gets it'. They are there to vent at when its shit, to listen when it's hard, to reassure you when it's scary and to boost you when you're doubting it all. [L]
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[SEP] 3. Nice and simple: speak to people. Don't be embarrassed of your struggles. Recovery is TOUGH! You are a warrior. Reaching out by sharing and talking can be both empowering and comforting. The people that love and care for you will WANT to support you; let them in. [L]
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[SEP] 4. Signpost people around you to recovery resources, especially if they are struggling to understand things and/or keen to learn more. Doing this could help them 'get it' which will make them much more able to support you moving forwards. [L]
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[SEP] 5. Speak out, be honest and if that doesn't work: move on. This was something I found really helpful when it came to dealing with the people who didn't/wouldn't/couldn't 'get it'. If people's actions or conversations are making things feel more difficult for you then be honest with yourself, and them, about it and speak out. If asking them to change the subject or asking them to stop doing a certain thing has no effect, then make the decision (wherever it is possible for you to do so) to remove yourself from that situation/conversation/environment. When that isn't possible (for example if you live with that person) then things can be a bit trickier but remember: you have control over your recovery and choosing to beat an ED is an active process, not a passive one. If you can't literally avoid that person then 'move on' by actively deciding not to allow them to have a negative impact on you or your recovery. Your recovery is 100% based on your choices: you are in



control. Decide not to allow them to affect you and move on.

No. 11

Dealing with Triggers

1. Get out. Back off. Move away. Initially in recovery (and long term for some) the best thing to do is to avoid situations/people/places/things that are triggering. You are vulnerable and that is ok but don't be a victim, take action. Own the fact that XYZ has triggered you and value your recovery enough to step away from/avoid the things that might harm it.

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2. Talk it through with your recovery buddy/friend/counsellor/coach etc. Don't let the negative thoughts and feelings fester. SEP

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3. Remind yourself of why you are recovering, why you are fighting and why whatever has been said/has happened is not worth giving all that up for. SEP

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4. Embrace the pain. Cry, shout, curse, stamp and hide in a blanket fort. Feel your feelings. This too shall pass. SEP

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5. Eat. Let your brain and body know that no matter what, the show goes on.



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