

# RECOVERY SESSION: **BARRIERS TO RECOVERY**



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## DISCLAIMER

This resource is a living document and is open to change. It was created by students from within the Body Brave community and may not be fully representative of the full spectrum of disordered eating experiences. If you have any suggestions to improve this resource or lived experiences that you don't see represented here, please email us at [info@bodybrave.ca](mailto:info@bodybrave.ca).

## *Barriers to Recovery*

There is no shortage of barriers to recovery, which is part of why it can feel so overwhelming. This handout will explore some of the more personal and relational barriers to eating disorder recovery that we might face, but we would be remiss if we didn't also mention the structural and systemic barriers that can impact someone's ability to recover.

## **STRUCTURAL/SYSTEMIC BARRIERS (to name just a few!)**

- **Financially inaccessible care** - Treatment and support, especially high intensity treatment, can be incredibly costly. Other financial considerations are medications, recovery supports such as books, food, clothing, etc.
- **Geographically inaccessible care** - Virtual care is becoming increasingly more popular, helping to make eating disorder treatment and support available. But for those in Northern or rural areas treatment can still be hard to access.
- **Healthcare Bias** - Racialized folks, queer, trans, and non-binary people, people living in larger bodies, and men are all groups statistically less likely to have disordered eating symptoms diagnosed or recognized by their doctor, which can be a significant barrier to treatment.

## **BARRIERS TO RECOVERY**

The first step of overcoming a barrier is to first be able to recognize it, name it, and acknowledge it. We are going to go through a few of the most common barriers to eating disorder recovery that someone might experience.

### ***Feeling that Recovery Isn't Necessary***

One of the biggest barriers someone might face when thinking about eating disorder recovery is not knowing or believing that anything is wrong. When facing this barrier someone might think that they don't need to recover, that they are not 'sick enough' for additional support or they are unwilling to admit anything is wrong.

If this is feeling like a barrier to thinking about recovery for you it's important to be intentional and honest with yourself, and really take an inventory of your disordered behaviours and how they are affecting your life, your physical health, your relationships, your sense of self, your ability to function, and your ability to live a life that truly reflects your values. This can be hard, and it's not something that you can work through quickly. Take time and be honest with yourself, do not romanticize your disordered behaviours or the effects of them.

### ***Equating Recovery to Failure***

Because of the rigid belief structures that often maintain an eating disorder (perfectionistic thinking, harsh rules, black and white thinking, etc.) the principals of recovery (moderation, self kindness, etc.) can seem inherently wrong to someone with an eating disorder. When you are in the eating disorder mindset, recovery feels like defeat, it can feel like failure. Of course, recovery is not failure. But the eating disorder voice is not one to go quietly in the night. Your eating disorder can be loud and persistent and work to convince you that anything that does not serve the eating disorder is a waste.

If this is feeling like a barrier for you, know that you are not alone. One way you can work to overcome this barrier is to first just begin to recognize when those 'recovery is failure' thoughts creep in, take a moment, and breathe. Acknowledge that it's happening and call it what it is, your eating disorder voice not your authentic voice. Growing your authentic voice to be louder than your eating disorder voice takes time, it's like a muscle that you have to strengthen by using it more and more as you are able. Be patient with yourself through this process, and know that there is going to be a day when recovery feels like a triumph.

## **Not Feeling Ready to Recovery**

Overcoming an eating disorder is about more than giving up unhealthy eating behaviours. It is also about rediscovering who you are beyond your eating habits, weight, and body image. Oftentimes at some point of struggling with disordered eating, your sickness becomes your truth, it becomes a part of your identity. This is partly why feeling 'ready' to recover can feel so completely inaccessible, because it's like trying to conceptualize abandoning a part of ourselves that has served a purpose and kept us safe.

Coming up against this barrier is hard, and it takes time and intention in working to redefine ourselves without eating disorder behaviours to begin to move past it. Letting go of what is familiar can be really scary. We might be fearful of who we are without disordered eating, feel angry that we have to change. We are forced to ask ourselves the question, "Who am I without disordered eating?". And we then have to go out and find the answer to that question day by day, action by action.

## **Feelings of Shame**

Shame can feel similar to guilt, but they are two different sensations:

- Guilt is a feeling you get when you did something wrong, or perceived you did something wrong.
- Shame is a feeling that your whole self is wrong, and it may not be related to a specific behaviour or event.

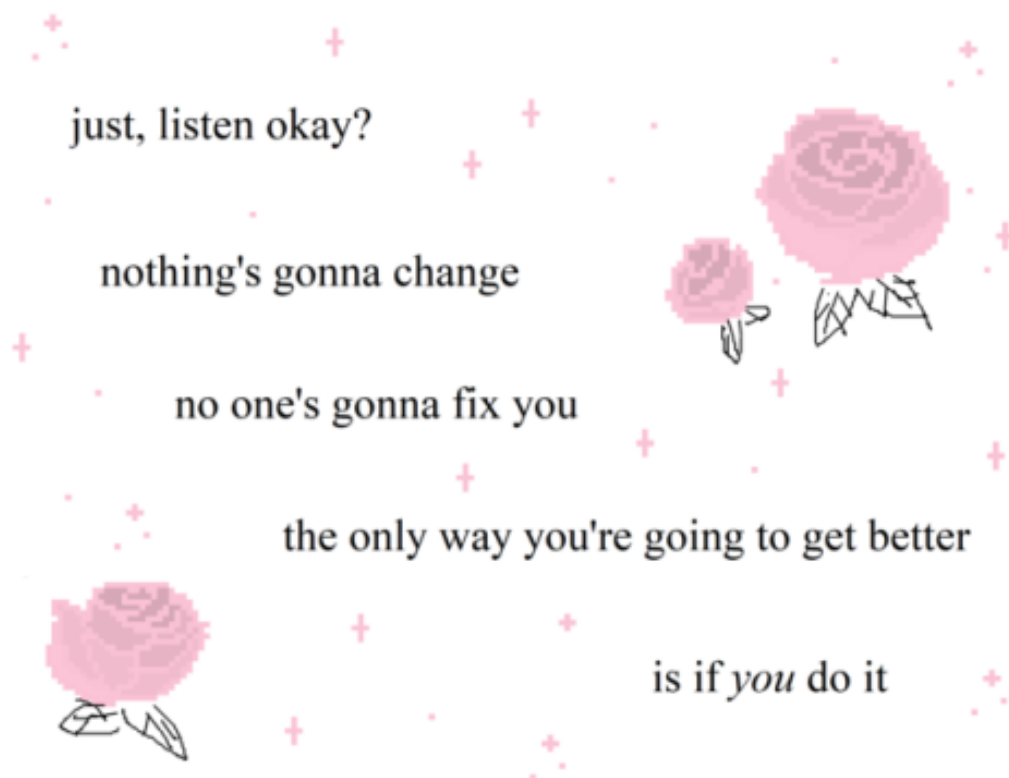
The experience of shame—a feeling of being unworthy, bad, or wrong—can be extremely uncomfortable. Shame has the potential to change the way we see ourselves and may lead to long-lasting personal and interpersonal difficulties. We may feel shameful for our disordered eating behaviours, for our "inability" to recover, for the way our relationships have suffered, for the person we feel we have become. For people struggling with disordered eating, you may not be able to actually pinpoint any exact reason for shame you feel, you just know it's there.

Shame makes us direct our focus inward and view our entire self in a negative light. If you believe shame is acting as a barrier for you in your eating disorder recovery there are a few starting points you could try: challenging the critical voice (the voice that says you are shameful or validates feelings of shame), inviting more compassionate voices into your space (this could be you working to offer yourself more self-compassion, or talking to a loved one who can offer that compassion).

## **Lack of Social Support**

Social isolation is a common consequence of disordered eating. Having even one safe and supportive relationship can be incredibly powerful for someone starting or navigating recovery. Because eating disorders and disordered eating are so widely misunderstood, trying to talk to others and be understood can actually be incredible alienating no matter how much we want to connect with others. Stigma related to attention seeking, being seen as personally responsible for the illness and recovery, and a sense of being treated negatively, can all hinder someone when seeking support.

When facing the barrier of lack of social support it can be hard to know where to start. Surrounding yourself with the people or things in your life that already make you feel positive in your day-to-day is a great start to identifying areas you can rely on for support when you're struggling. Finding the right people and slowly starting to let them in requires self-awareness and vulnerability, neither of which are easy. Start with trying to put energy and effort into existing positive and safe relationships, and continue to build your willingness and ability to acknowledge and recognize your feelings and needs. When you are ready you could start to explore how to communicate those feelings and needs with others.





## **AFFIRMATIONS**

"There is nothing special about my eating disorder that means I cannot recover."

"There is more to my identity than an eating disorder."

"The coping mechanisms that help keep me safe are valid and deserve respect. And I can work to develop new ones."

"I give myself permission to begin again."

"I am allowed to stand up for myself, including against my own mind sometimes."

"Today I take responsibility for my own recovery."

"The process of recovery may be an epic one, but it's worth it and I know it."

"Today I choose things that strengthen my recovery."

"I am willing to take positive action today."

"I will make and keep promises to myself. I will regain trust in myself. I will repair my confidence."

"I've survived losses that were supposed to finish me. As I continue to be challenged I discover the strength within me is powerful enough to overcome any obstacle."

"I will accept myself at this moment, and keep moving forward."

"I deserve to dream about things beyond my eating disorder."

"The voice of my eating disorder does not represent how I feel about myself."

"I am open to positive changes in my life today."

"Health and happiness are a lifestyle I cultivate as I free myself from my disordered eating patterns."

"I cannot climb uphill by thinking downhill thoughts."

"I accept only thoughts that support me and make me feel good."

## **JOURNAL PROMPTS**

Journalling is a great way to check-in with yourself, and explore your thoughts and feelings in a tangible way. Even writing jot notes can be a powerful tool. Choose a prompt below to reflect on, maybe you choose one, or choose to do one a day. You can set a timer for 3-5 minutes, or write for as long as you need.

- What is one thing that makes you feel excited for recovery? Write about it in detail.
- What is something you wish had known about recovery? What would you tell someone who is thinking about recovery?
- What difficult thoughts or emotions come up most frequently for you?
- When you are having a good day complete the prompt: I deserve to feel happy because...
- What parts of your eating disorder/disordered eating behaviours do not align with your values?
- What is a manageable goal you want to accomplish within the next five years?
- What do you fear most? Have your fears changed throughout life?
- What parts of daily life cause stress, frustration, or sadness? What can you do to change those experiences?
- Explore an opinion about yourself that you held in the past but have since questioned or changed. What led you to change that opinion?
- What are three self-defeating thoughts that show up in your self-talk? How can you reframe them to encourage yourself instead?
- What go-to coping strategies help you get through moments of emotional or physical pain? Are these strategies you would be willing to carry through the rest of your life?

## FURTHER LEARNING

### Podcasts

[Shame Free Eating: Barriers to Eating Disorder Recovery](#)

[Binge Eating Dietitian Podcast: Common Barriers to Eating Disorder Recovery](#)

[Let's Talk Recovery & Family: Barriers to Recovery and Healthy Relationships](#)

[Holistic Health Radio: Overcoming Obstacles in ED and HA Recovery](#)

[Recovery Bites: Vulnerability is Strength](#)

### Reading

[What to do if you're not ready to recover from an eating disorder](#)

[Breaking the Cycle of Shame in ED Recovery](#)

[Toxic Shame and Eating Disorders](#)

[Six Ways to Stare Down Shame in Eating Disorder Recovery](#)

[I'm Hiding, Please See Me: Unmasking Shame](#)

[There's no such thing as a "failure" in recovery](#)

[To Anyone Who Feels Like Eating Disorder Recovery Is Impossible Right Now](#)

[Working Through Body Image Distress in ED Recovery](#)