

What Do I Say Right Now?

6 mealtime scripts for the hard moments in eating disorder recovery

You've probably been told to stay calm. Don't make food a battle. And you're trying. But sometimes nobody actually gives you the words.

I know those moments because I lived them. I read the articles. I bought the cookbooks. And I still said the wrong thing more times than I can count. Not because I didn't care. Because I was scared too.

Eventually, I started creating little scripts for myself. These aren't magic words. They won't make an eating disorder disappear. **They're simply words you can have ready when your own words are hard to find.**

FIND YOUR MOMENT

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BEFORE THE SCRIPTS

Your Presence Matters Too

Our kids often pick up on us before we've said a word. This doesn't mean you need to walk into every meal perfectly calm. I certainly didn't. Sometimes the first person we need to slow down is ourselves. Take a breath and remind yourself:

My child is having a hard time. They are not trying to give me a hard time.

Connect before you direct.

See the person first. Then help them do the hard thing.

SCRIPT 1

When They Push the Plate Away

The fork goes down. The plate gets pushed away. Your own fear rises almost instantly. If you can, resist the urge to start by explaining or convincing. Begin with what you see.

WHAT YOU MIGHT SAY

"I can see this is really hard right now."

PAUSE. THEN:

"I know part of you wants to be done. And we still need to keep going. I'm right here with you."

If the resistance continues:

"I know. This is hard. We're still going to do it, and I'm staying right here."

You don't need new words every time. There's something steadying about the same calm message: *I see you. The expectation hasn't changed. And I'm not leaving.*

TRY TO AVOID

"Just try one bite." • "You have to eat something." • "Do you know how worried I am?"

SCRIPT 2

When They're Overwhelmed at the Table

Some kids cry. Some get angry. Some shut down. My son rarely showed me what he was feeling. He could be incredibly stoic. But sometimes I could see it in his eyes.

WHAT YOU MIGHT SAY

If your child is crying or visibly upset:

"I see you. I know this is really hard."

PAUSE.

"You don't have to stop feeling what you're feeling. We can sit here for a minute."

Then, when it feels right:

"We're going to keep going. I'll help you."

If your child goes quiet or shuts down:

"You don't have to explain it. I can see this is hard. I'm here."

If they push you away:

"I can tell part of you really wants me to back off right now. I understand. I'm going to give you a little room, but I'm still here."

"I'll help you" communicates something "You can do it" sometimes doesn't: *We're in this together.*

TRY TO AVOID

"There's nothing to cry about." • "You're making this harder than it needs to be." • "I can't do this every night."

SCRIPT 3

When They Say, "I'm Not Hungry"

Your child may genuinely not feel hungry. In recovery, hunger and fullness cues can be confusing. You don't need to argue about it.

WHAT YOU MIGHT SAY

"I believe you that you don't feel hungry right now."

PAUSE.

"And we still need to eat. You don't have to feel hungry for your body to need food. I'll stay with you."

If they continue pushing back:

"I hear you. And we still need to eat. I'll sit with you while we get through it."

Sometimes simply sitting down beside them says it: *I'm here. I'm not rushing you.*

TRY TO AVOID

"You have to be hungry. You haven't eaten all day."

SCRIPT 4

When Someone Else Comments at the Table

A sibling makes a comment. Grandma mentions calories. Most comments aren't malicious. People simply don't know what to say. In that moment, you just want to help your child stay anchored in the meal.

WHAT YOU MIGHT SAY

To the table:

"We're going to leave that one alone for now and focus on dinner."

Quietly to your child:

"I've got this. You don't need to respond. Stay with me."

Later, away from the table:

"Right now we're trying to keep comments about food, bodies, exercise, or what anyone is eating away from the table. Nobody did anything wrong."

Protect the moment first. Talk about it later.

SCRIPT 5

When You Lose Your Steadiness

Sometimes you will. I certainly did. What matters isn't doing every meal perfectly. What matters is that we can go back and repair.

WHAT YOU MIGHT SAY

First, to yourself:

"That was a hard moment. I don't have to do this perfectly. I can go back and repair it."

Then, to your child:

"I want to talk about what happened at dinner. I was scared and frustrated, and I spoke to you in a way I wish I hadn't. I'm sorry."

PAUSE. THEN:

"I'm still learning too. I love you, and I'm going to keep trying."

For a child struggling with perfectionism, this matters: Someone can make a mistake, own it, repair it, and still be loved.

TRY TO AVOID

"I'm sorry you got upset." Instead: "I'm sorry for how I spoke to you."

SCRIPT 6

When One Sentence Isn't Enough

Sometimes "I know this is hard" isn't enough. The fear is too big. Try naming two or three things that might make this moment particularly hard, so your child knows you're trying to understand what this feels like from where they're sitting.

WHAT YOU MIGHT SAY

If they're facing a fear food:

"I can understand why this feels like so much tonight. You haven't eaten something like this in a long time, so it probably feels unfamiliar and scary. What's on the plate may look like more than you think you can handle right now. And I'm guessing part of you is already worried about what you're going to feel after you eat it."

PAUSE. LET THEM HEAR YOU. THEN:

"I know how hard this is. I'm not going anywhere. We'll get through it together."

"Let's put some music on and just start with the next bite."

IF THEY'RE STRUGGLING WITH THEIR BODY

"I can see how uncomfortable you feel in your body tonight. Recovery asks your body to do things that can feel really unfamiliar. And when you're already anxious, those feelings can seem even louder."

"You don't have to figure all of this out tonight. I'm here."

BUILD YOUR OWN

"I can understand why you might feel _____, because _____, and because _____, and because _____."

Adapted from the Emotion-Focused Family Therapy validation framework of Dr. Adele Lafrance.

You don't need to guess perfectly. You can even say, "I may not have this exactly right, but I'm wondering if..."

This one asks more of us. If your heart is pounding, put your feet on the floor. Slow your breathing. Say a quick prayer.

I don't have to fix everything happening here. I just need to be present for this moment.

BEFORE YOU GO

It's Not About Getting the Words Perfect

The words helped me tremendously. But I wish I had understood sooner that I was coming to the table too. My fear came with me. My exhaustion came with me. **None of that caused my son's eating disorder.** But it affected how I responded. I needed somewhere for my fear to go too.

You cannot give what you have not received.

Validation may not make the feeling disappear, but sometimes it can lower the distress and open the door, even just a crack.

A FEW THINGS TO REMEMBER

Connect before you direct. · Validation isn't permission. · You don't need the perfect words. · Repair counts. · Your steadiness matters too.

WHAT MIGHT HELP NEXT

Sadness may need comfort. · **Anger** may need to be heard, some space, or a kind boundary. · **Anxiety or shame** may need reassurance and your steady presence.

And sometimes validation isn't enough. Your child may also need practical support. A limit, a redirection, help solving the problem, or simply having you quietly take the lead.

Your child isn't giving you a hard time. They're having a hard time.

And sometimes the most loving thing we can offer is:

I see how hard this is. And I'm staying with you.

You were never meant to carry the other 167 hours alone.

If you'd like a steady place to bring the hard meals, the fear, and everything happening between appointments, that's the work I do through daily mentorship with AccompanyMe.

[Learn more about daily mentorship →](#)

Not ready for that? Keep these scripts close.

Put them on your phone. Print the page that helps you most. Read one before dinner.

You don't have to remember all of this in the moment. Sometimes you just need a few words to help you find your way back to your child.

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I've walked this road as a mother too.

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