

Worksheet 2.3: Understanding the trap of an eating disorder: the toxic effect of prolonged starvation and repeated habits

The symptoms of an eating disorder can paralyse the brain and body, making recovery more difficult. A useful analogy is to think of someone stuck in quicksand, who does not realise the danger and so is getting sucked further and further in until they are completely unable to move.

Common difficulties include:

Table 2.3 Brain changes from starvation

Decreased	Increased
Pleasure from non-food rewards (e.g., social connection).	Thoughts and dreams of food.
Understanding how other people are thinking, knowing what to say and being comfortable in social situations. Signalling connection to others non-verbally.	Compulsive behaviours – people with ED have high rates of OCD (similar genes and brain systems are involved).
Ability to self-regulate emotions leading to volatility.	Avoidance – avoiding negative emotions, or difficult situations such as eating in public.
Decision-making – unable to make decisions, which leads to increasing demands for reassurance. ‘Have I got this right? Tell me what to do? Should I eat that?’	Sensitivity to threat – the starved brain is a stressed brain, so it feels as if living under a constant threat in the shape of food, social situations, etc.
Flexibility – unable to cope with the unexpected especially around food ‘You didn’t tell me I had to eat that. I will not eat that food. I cannot eat xyz food.’	Focus on detail rather than big picture.
Planning – difficulty thinking ahead, especially for out of the ordinary events where there is a high degree of uncertainty.	Perfectionist traits. Fearing mistakes.

Can you think of examples where Edi has displayed any of these effects that are common consequences of starvation?



Figure 2.9 It can be easy for families to feel stuck. Carers are terrified of sinking further as if in quicksand, while Edi feels safe and comfortable and has no reason to make any changes. Offers of help are likely to fall on deaf ears and/or be strongly resisted

The brain is very sensitive to poor nutrition. It needs more nutrition per pound of tissue than any other organ in the body. An underfed brain cannot function efficiently. The brain responds best to regular feeding. Reduced brain power exaggerates some symptoms and traits. It may seem that the whole family is sinking in quicksand. This exercise can help carers to think about some of the challenges Edi is facing, and to take a step back, reflect and use different tools.