

Worksheet 2.7: Externalising the illness, part two – the red balloon/blue balloon metaphor

The metaphor

When your loved one is first ill it is only natural to try to fix things for them. In this metaphor, the blue balloon represents the healthy, resilient side of the person, with a good support network and a toolbox of coping strategies. The red balloon represents the insecure, unhealthy side. We all have a red balloon and a blue balloon. For most of us, most of the time the blue balloon is much bigger. On a bad day, the red balloon can inflate a little, and by the end of a bad day we feel exhausted and supersensitive and even the slightest thing, like a light bulb blowing, can seem like a catastrophe.

Luckily there is much in the blue balloon that can help to fight back. Talking to someone, a hot bath and a good night's sleep, and the red balloon is back in its box.

However, for Edi, their red balloon contains the eating disorder behaviours and inflates more every day. It is easy to get sucked in and focus all your caring attention on the ill behaviour rather than the well person. The carer naturally falls into the trap of arguing with logic and nagging: 'Joe if you don't eat more and exercise less you will end up in hospital.'

As the ED becomes more strong the carer might be tempted to argue more and more in a critical and at times hostile manner: 'Joe if you don't stop this ridiculous exercise regime, and if you don't start eating more you will end up in hospital and you might die.'

As one carer describes: 'I truly thought this approach would work and it took a while for me to realise I was inadvertently blowing up the red balloon, and by ignoring the blue balloon, the well side of my son, then this side was gradually deflating. So, we learned to step back from the ED traits that we had been trying to control, and to focus on all the characteristics that we knew our son still had, they were just being masked at the moment.'

Two useful phrases to remember:

Talk to the person not the illness.

Give more attention to the behaviours you like, and less attention to those that you don't like.

Of course, you still need to get professional help for the illness but try to avoid getting caught up with increasingly emotional arguments with the illness. Lots of relaxing and pleasurable family time will help to start to blow back up the blue balloon.