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### Q&A With Trixie: Building Relationships

**By: Trixie Hennessey**

**Q:** Whenever I spend time with my daughter, I feel like everything I do or say might trigger her. How do I build a normal relationship?

**A:** This is a great question because I know that so many parents can relate to your dilemma.

I would begin by stating that as parents, we are always going to have ruptures with our children. Since there is no avoiding that, **be honest and let your daughter know that you are probably going to do and say things that will trigger her, but that you will also be there to support her through being triggered.** Ruptures and repairs are a part of all relationships. How we show up in moments of upset and distress is the key. Reaching out with understanding and empathy in those moments can create feelings of psychological safety and security.



**We get to be perfectly imperfect and it is important to model self-compassion in moments of imperfection – those moments of rupture.** In these ways, we give those close to us permission to show up more authentically and vulnerably as less-than-perfect versions of themselves, thereby fostering deeper and more meaningful connection.

In building authenticity, as your connection with your daughter deepens, you will become increasingly attuned to her specific triggers, maybe things such as changes in plans, meal times, or social challenges with peers. These clues will tell you where to focus your support.

We are not looking to pave the way for our children so that they will never be triggered; rather, our hope is to help our children to better handle a full range of emotional states. So don't spend too much energy trying to avoid triggering her. Rather, model being able to handle difficult feelings and emotions yourself.

**I often encourage parents to “speak the unspoken” by saying out loud what might be uncomfortably hanging in the air.** Begin by asking your daughter what she wants from your relationship. Then, assure her that you can handle whatever comes up as you are supporting her through her difficulties. Let her know that you will not tolerate disrespect, or create different rules in order to accommodate her eating disorder. Continue to remind your daughter that you love her, especially when things are difficult and she seems to be angrily pushing you away. **It is in these moments when her need for safety and connection will be the greatest, and she will be looking for reassurance that you will be there for her no matter how many times things go sideways.**

In terms of outside support, your daughter would benefit from accessing outside services that can help her build skills around managing her distress. Help can come in the form of individual therapy, group therapy, and more intensive care offered in residential treatment such as at the Looking Glass Residence.

Lastly, I would encourage you to let go of the idea of creating a “normal relationship.” **Cultivating healthy relationships is less complicated when we focus on all of the amazing things we do want in our lives instead of the things we do not want.** Begin by placing less emphasis on the eating disorder and all the other things you don't want in your relationship, and spend more time adding in fun, adventure, and silliness. And above all, spend time practicing and modeling self-compassion and gratitude. Encourage new interests that can support your daughter

in building an identity that stands outside of her eating disorder identity. Identity is critically important as this is where the world validates and reflects back who we believe we are.

It takes some serious commitment and resolve to show up for our children in their moments of greatest distress, precisely because we are so connected. We feel one another's emotions and moods very deeply, so you may find yourself swaying in the turbulence of her emotional storms and feel shaken in the aftermath. Hold steady and try to be the calm, grounding force and secure base that your daughter can seek out when she needs to find shelter from her eating disorder storm.

*Trixie holds a Masters of Social Work degree from the University of British Columbia- Okanagan, where she also completed post-Masters training in Neurosequential Therapy. Trixie is the Looking Glass Foundation's Program Manager and has been a part of our team since 2011. She is also a Therapeutic Consultant at Optimal Family Wellness. She lives in Vancouver, BC and loves hiking, photography, and being mom to her two children.*

*Submit your questions about disordered eating, mental health and supporting those around you to [trixie@lookingglassbc.com](mailto:trixie@lookingglassbc.com). Through Q&A With Trixie, she will provide general advice for informational purposes only. For other inquiries and services, please consult directly with a licensed professional.*