

EASTER AND EATING DISORDERS

WRITTEN BY
FIRST STEPS ED



Understanding Easter



Easter is the most important date in the Christian calendar. In the UK, many will celebrate Easter as secular holiday rather than for religious reasons (although some will combine the two aspects.)

For Christians, Easter is the day of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ (and is one of the most important festivals in the Christian calendar!) It also marks a four-day bank holiday weekend which often involves plans with family and friends, perhaps with a number of activities centred around food (Easter egg hunts, family meals, baking, hot cross buns... and much more!)

Whilst many will enjoy the Easter celebration and short break from work and school, those who are struggling at the moment may find their eating disorder takes away from the joys and tradition of the holidays.

Remember, just because things are challenging right now, it doesn't mean your recovery is no longer a priority. In times of uncertainty or change, keep looking after yourself and reach out for support whenever you need it. **You are not alone.**

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Important!

Whether or not you celebrate Easter, it's important to make an effort to understand different cultures and the impact they have on us. Together we can learn how to support friends and family, and promote safe spaces within our communities and wider society.



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There is so much support and resources around Christmas but I actually find Easter so much harder. I've been struggling with Binge Eating Disorder for many years and even though I'm largely recovered now I have never managed to make it through the Easter period without a binge and I carry that failure so heavily for months after.

Coping With An Eating Disorder During Easter

Easter is a central holiday of Christianity which follows 'Lent', a season of prayer, fasting and repentance. Good Friday (the Friday before Easter) is the Christian day to commemorate the crucifixion of Jesus, followed by Easter Sunday where we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus.

Today, Christians worldwide will observe and celebrate Easter in a number of ways, through church and community services, prayer and baking (resurrection rolls.) Others will celebrate the season through non-religious traditions: Easter egg hunts, socialising and family meals, for example.

Many will look forward to the Easter break and the opportunity to get together with friends and family and engage in some of the traditions listed above. The bank holidays give us a well-deserved break from work, and some shops and businesses close early to give us yet more opportunity to take a break from our usual responsibilities.

All of the above might paint a pretty picture for some, but if you're struggling with your mental health, particularly an eating disorder, any so-called 'simple pleasures' can feel triggering, challenging or just impossible at the moment.

Here's what our community is worried about...

"My routine is what keeps me in recovery so I'm worried about the upcoming changes and how it will impact my mood and urges. No one gets the stress!"

"Even my usual shopping trip can feel triggering this time of year. Whole aisles are cluttered with my typical binge food and family aren't helping when they say 'just one won't hurt!'"

"It feels as though everyone is focused on what I'm eating, when I'm eating and how much. I've worked so hard to recover and feel comfortable, but holidays like Easter open the door to triggering comments from family."



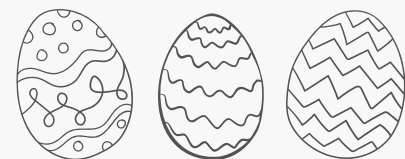
What challenges to expect

It can feel frustrating when the things we should or used to enjoy become events we find most difficult to navigate. Over time it's easy for those feelings to become internalised and aimed at yourself.

Whilst Easter might not be as 'big' as Christmas, the change in routine can still be a huge trigger for those struggling with an eating disorder. It is normal to feel anxious around certain events or cultural festivals as they all bring unique challenges which you might not have experienced in recovery, or perhaps you have negative memories relating to these events.

Similar to Christmas, Easter can bring with it certain pressures particularly around food and body image. Both holidays involve **family gatherings** and socialising with people you might not have seen in a while. During this time you might feel additional pressure to act or behave in a certain way and sometimes 'mask' your true emotions so that you appear to be coping (even if that is not the case.)

There is also the challenge of food at Easter, including the typical '**big**' **family meals**, and copious amounts of chocolate and/or **easter eggs** which can be triggering for some.



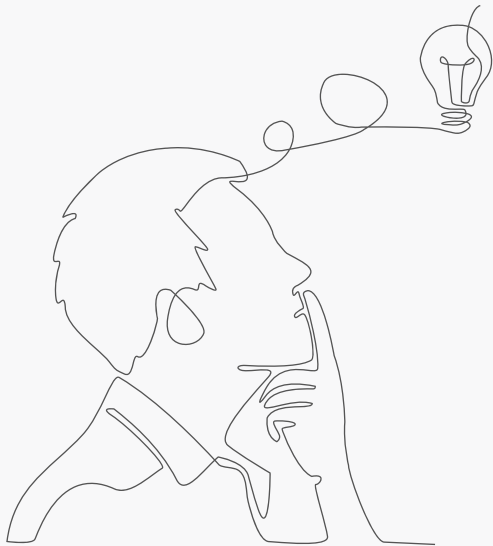
What happens if I engage in disordered eating behaviours?

Easter can be a challenging time, so try not to be too hard on yourself if you engage with your eating disorder. Try to understand why this happened and what you can do differently next time. If you need to, ask someone for help or increase your planned strategies.

Sweet foods are often demonised and labelled as 'bad' foods. This can be particularly tricky at Easter where we are often gifted Easter eggs and other sweet treats which can create lots of difficult thoughts and feelings. For those who struggle with **binge eating**, having lots of chocolate and sweet treats in the home could be a trigger too.

How to manage those challenges

If you are worried about Easter, and how to manage your recovery over the next couple of weeks, this guide will cover some thoughts, reflections and advice from our time and broader community.



Here's what we'll cover:

- 01 ROUTINE**
- 02 FOOD**
- 03 EASTER EGGS**
- 04 SOCIALISING**
- 05 SELF CARE**

First things first, if you are struggling with an eating disorder, eating difficulties or have concerns about your relationship with food, mood or your body image, support is available and consider reaching out to a professional.

It is good to check-in with yourself and make an informed decision about the holidays.

Don't be disheartened if you feel as though you can't engage in your usual Easter activities this year. Recognising that Easter might be a difficult time is an important element in recovery and will help you to prioritise any key goals around your recovery.

The good news is that at this time of year as we edge closer to summer, we are getting a little more sunlight every day. The air feels warmer, nature is showing off its colours and those spring showers give us a good chance of catching a rainbow. Remind yourself of the small things this season can bring, even when times feel hard.



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Lent always provided me with the perfect excuse to engage in my eating disorder. As a young woman I was always enthusiastic about joining my church and community in reflection and repentance, because I knew it meant I could engage in bad behaviours without much question. *These days I've learnt to set some boundaries around my faith so that I can feel close to God and my community in ways that protect my wellbeing, which means I can feel totally engage in celebrations like Easter!*

How to manage those challenges

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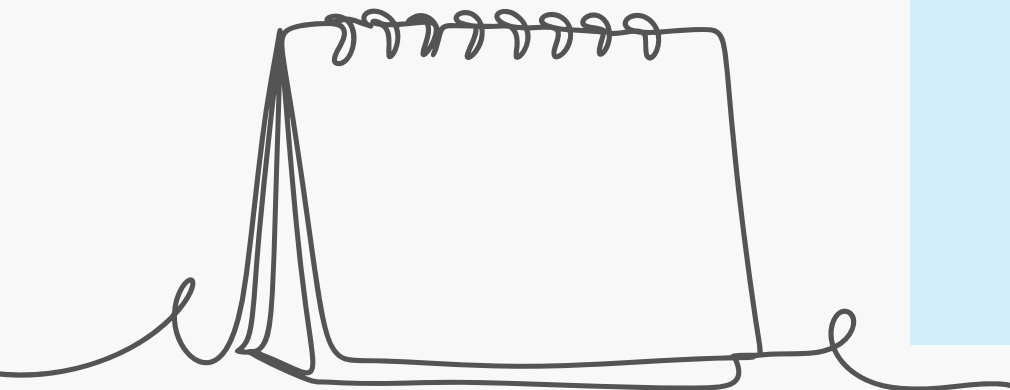
Routine

You might be worried about a change in routine over Easter, or a lack of routine all together. If you're not ready, know that you don't have to celebrate Easter if you are not at a point in your recovery journey.

BUT if you can, try to throw some little challenges in during the weekend. You might find that introducing some flexibility, as opposed to any rigid timings, might discourage any urges which would normally perpetuate eating disorder behaviours.

Some considerations:

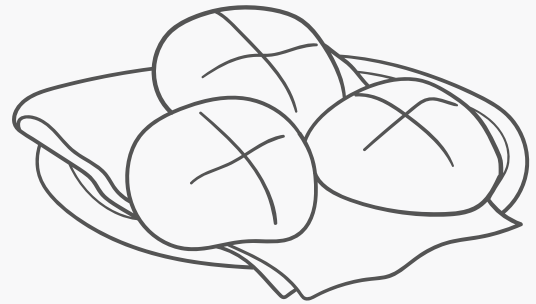
- If possible, try not to stray too far from your typical routine.
- Think of ways to include any 'non-negotiables' to help you check-in and prioritise your needs and recovery.
- Food shopping can be tough this time of year so ask for support if you need to. This might be to write a list, or find a shopping buddy.
- Schedule in some time for self care. Include things like positive affirmations and activities which make you feel good about yourself.
- If plans feel quite centred around food, think of ways you can introduce non-food related activities:
 - movie night
 - crafts (eg bonnet making)
 - a stroll around your local park to appreciate the seasonal changes in nature.
 - community events and church services
 - plant an Easter garden
 - Engage in volunteer work



How to manage those challenges

02

Food



There are lots of seasonal foods in the shops this time of year, which can pose a challenge to those in recovery.

If your difficulties centre around restriction...

It may be nice to think of one Easter-related food you used to enjoy the taste of, prior to your eating disorder. This approach will help you if the variety of foods on offer feels overwhelming. You could use this as an opportunity to challenge yourself and choose a food you like and re-introduce this back into your diet.

If you struggle with overeating and/or purging...

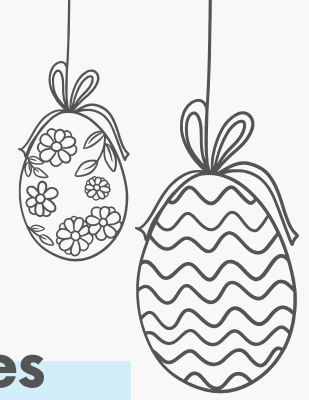
Think about how you can manage these behaviours. It might include spending time thinking about your triggers and how you might be able to intervene or respond if any situations arise and/or urges. You could involve a support worker or family to help you figure out a plan.

Some considerations:

Think about what it is that YOU want vs. what it is your eating disorder wants. How do these choices differ? If challenging your eating disorder feels too hard today, think about how you can meet in the middle.

Try not to restrict your food over the Easter weekend. This can lead to cravings, especially around foods you've been trying to avoid and can make you more likely to 'binge' or engage in other negative behaviours.

Remember, all food is good food. If you're craving a food and you want to enjoy it, know it's okay to eat your these foods in moderation without guilt or judgement. One meal or snack doesn't define your self-worth.



How to manage those challenges

03

Easter eggs (and gifting!)

Keeping with the theme of food, there is the matter of Easter eggs, a common gift this time of year.

They start to appear on supermarket shelves now as early as January, as soon as we start packing away our tinsel and Christmas trees.

Importantly, have one if you want one. Don't deny yourself an Easter egg, no matter what your eating disorder might be telling you. Give yourself permission to have one (if you want one) and enjoy it.

You might find family and friends gift you a couple of Easter eggs this year, and that's okay. There is no pressure to eat them this weekend, or at all if you don't feel able to right now.

Thank them for them for thinking of you, and you could ask a family member to put them out of the way for now until you feel more able to enjoy them.

Alternative Easter gift ideas?

You might decide that Easter eggs aren't what you want this year as they feel like too much of a challenge. In which case, it can be helpful to have a conversation with family and friends beforehand

We asked our community what are gift alternatives they'd quite like to receive over Easter instead:

- A music, podcast or meditation subscription
- Understanding and support (like signing up for the First Steps ED 'Skills for Carers' course)
- Cosy slippers or fluffy socks (the perfect addition to any film night)
- A new mug and good book
- A lovely houseplant to signify spring and fresh starts
- A personalised journal or notebook for recovery
- Any self care gifts which promote wellness, calm, and relaxation - like candles!
- A thoughtful and handmade gift or card

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My family were amazing during my recovery, but I had some relatives who either didn't know, or didn't care. they would buy me Easter eggs and get upset if I didn't join everyone in having them for breakfast.

It was great that my sister was there for me as a buffer to explain to them how I was feeling and that their comments were unhelpful. I didn't feel confident expressing those feelings, but they needed to hear it!

How to manage those challenges

04

Socialising

Socialising can be a significant element of Easter, whether you spend time with your community and church over the break or find yourself with additional time with friends and family because of the Bank Holidays.

A good first step is to talk to your family to determine what the weekend will look like so that there aren't any major surprises. This awareness will help to reduce some of the anxiety you have about the holidays, and give you time to prepare, if you need to.

No matter what your plans, keep in mind some useful coping mechanisms and grounding techniques to help centre you during stressful moments. This might be to step outside and look at how many shades of green you can see, or what you can hear in that moment.

For social events, it can be helpful to create a checklist:



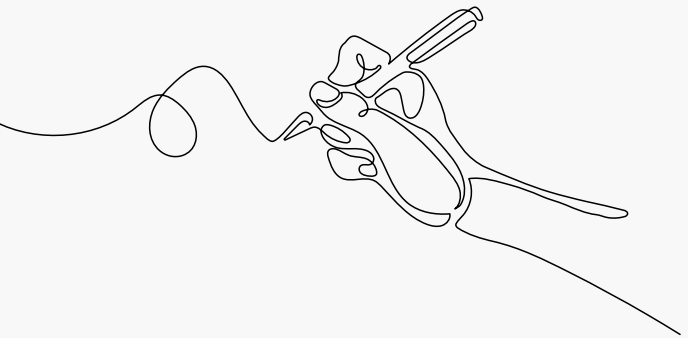
Checklist

- Speak to someone about how you're feeling or if you're worried about upcoming Easter holiday plans. If people know how you are feeling, they can keep an eye on you and support you.
- If you have a big family meal coming up, make a plan. You might wish to choose who you sit next to, or a code-word or signal to someone when things feel overwhelming.
- For relatives you might not have seen in a while, try to have a chat with them beforehand to help reduce any anxiety you might have. Or you could ask a parent or sibling to do this on your behalf.
- Unfortunately during social occasions, conversations can cluttered with unhelpful comments and/or questions. Have a think about how you might manage those difficult moments and how to respond.

How to manage those challenges

05

Self Care Toolkit



A checklist is great, but we can't prepare for everything.

This toolkit will be unique to everyone, so whilst we can offer some suggestion have a think about what works for you. Has there been a key tool in recovery that has helped you move through difficult moments?

Get creative! What can you have with you during family meals or when out and about? For example, if you respond well to daily affirmations, you could keep a note in your pocket, or download an app that sends you daily reminders.

What else?

- You could write down any helpful tips, coping strategies, quotes or reasons for recovery on small pieces of card, to keep on your person. Step outside or into the bathroom to look through them whenever you need to.
- Keeping a small stone or similar object in your pocket is a useful tool to keep anxious hands busy, grounding yourself by noticing how the object feels in your hand.

Find what comforts you...

Think about what calms you and helps you decrease anxiety and any difficult thoughts.

Breathing exercises, meditation and stretching.

Schedule in some time to engage in those activities and keep in mind some quick breathing techniques for stressful moments.

Focusing in on your senses.

Many individuals find that 'touch' can help with feelings of stress or anxiety. Whether that be through a hug from a family member, weight blankets and other fuzzy comforts or even tapping techniques.

Supporting Someone With An Eating Disorder

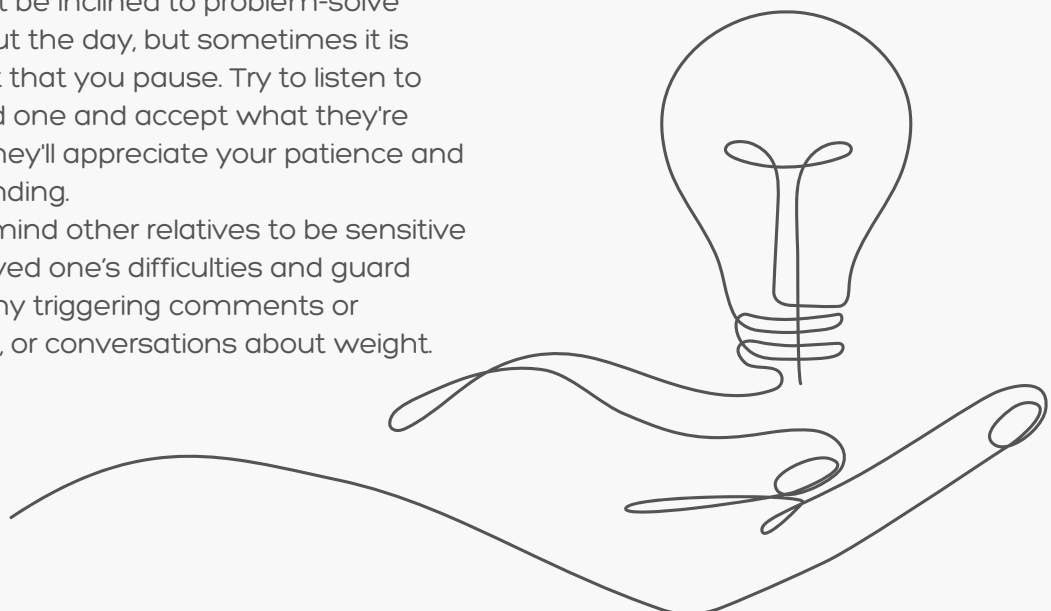
If you have relatives or friends with an eating disorder, it is good to be aware of what sorts of things can be triggering and any signs that they may be feeling overwhelmed. You might also want to have a conversation with them to understand how you can support them this Easter.

- Accept that you may not have the 'perfect Easter' this year, especially if your loved one is in the earlier stages of recovery.
- Don't assume your loved one won't want chocolate or Easter eggs this year as this might perpetuate their disordered thoughts. Have a conversation and see if it is a tradition they'd like to keep or change this year.
- Avoid commenting on what your loved one is eating. What you think might be a positive remark such as **'wow, are you eating all of that like the rest of us?'** might lead to them questioning their choice.
- Whilst it is good to have a plan an event or day, try to be flexible in the face of any stress or difficult moments.
- You might be inclined to problem-solve throughout the day, but sometimes it is important that you pause. Try to listen to your loved one and accept what they're saying. They'll appreciate your patience and understanding.
- Gently remind other relatives to be sensitive to your loved one's difficulties and guard against any triggering comments or questions, or conversations about weight.



In the early days I used to bury my head in the sand I suppose. I hope that for holidays like Easter we could all just pretend the ED wasn't there and just have a nice weekend... That never worked. Holidays are so much better now that as a family we can make plans, set boundaries and decide how we can challenge recovery, together.

Don't forget! Your mental health matters too. Schedule in some time to check-in with yourself and relax. Finding time to recharge will help you to assist your loved one.



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I think it is important to remember that the Easter weekend is only a few days long and it will pass before you know it, so if you can, try to enjoy the time. If you choose not to celebrate this year, its that time of year where we can find joy in the beginnings of Spring, better weather and longer days on the horizon.

First Steps ED is a leading specialist Eating Disorder charity, offering an array of therapy and person-centred support services to people of all ages, genders and backgrounds. Our programme of psychotherapy, peer support, groups and creative therapies helps those with eating disorders and associated mental health problems.

Alongside our specialist eating disorder services is our community engagement work. This includes our psycho-educational workshops in schools and groups within the community, helping young people and adults change their body image perception and relationship with food.

We also deliver professional training to healthcare professionals, GPs, Dentists, social care staff and teachers and mental nurses in schools amongst other staff working in roles that support young people to help them spot the signs and provide support.

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