Embedding PEACE in the Dining Room: Co-Producing Autism-Friendly Meal Support Tools

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Who We Are & Why This Matters

- We are an Assistant Psychologist & Registered Mental Health Nurse

- Why this matters?
  - Because the dining room is a critical PEACE environment.
  - We identified important challenges with meal support.

Challenges in Traditional Meal Support



COMMUNICATION BARRIERS, RIGIDITY



STAFF UNCERTAINTY → INCONSISTENT APPROACHES



SENSORY OVERWHELM



HIGH LEVELS OF DISTRESS

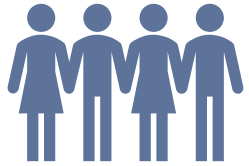
Why PEACE?

Autism-affirming, sensory-aware, flexible, collaborative

Translating psychological principles into *practical* dining-room tools

Co-production as a core value

So, what did we do?



We held focus groups with patients and staff



We pulled out themes from these groups



And brainstormed practical solutions

Developing Sensory-Friendly Meal Support Tools

- Personalized Meal Support Cards
- Staff Placemats
- Staff Easy Read Keycards

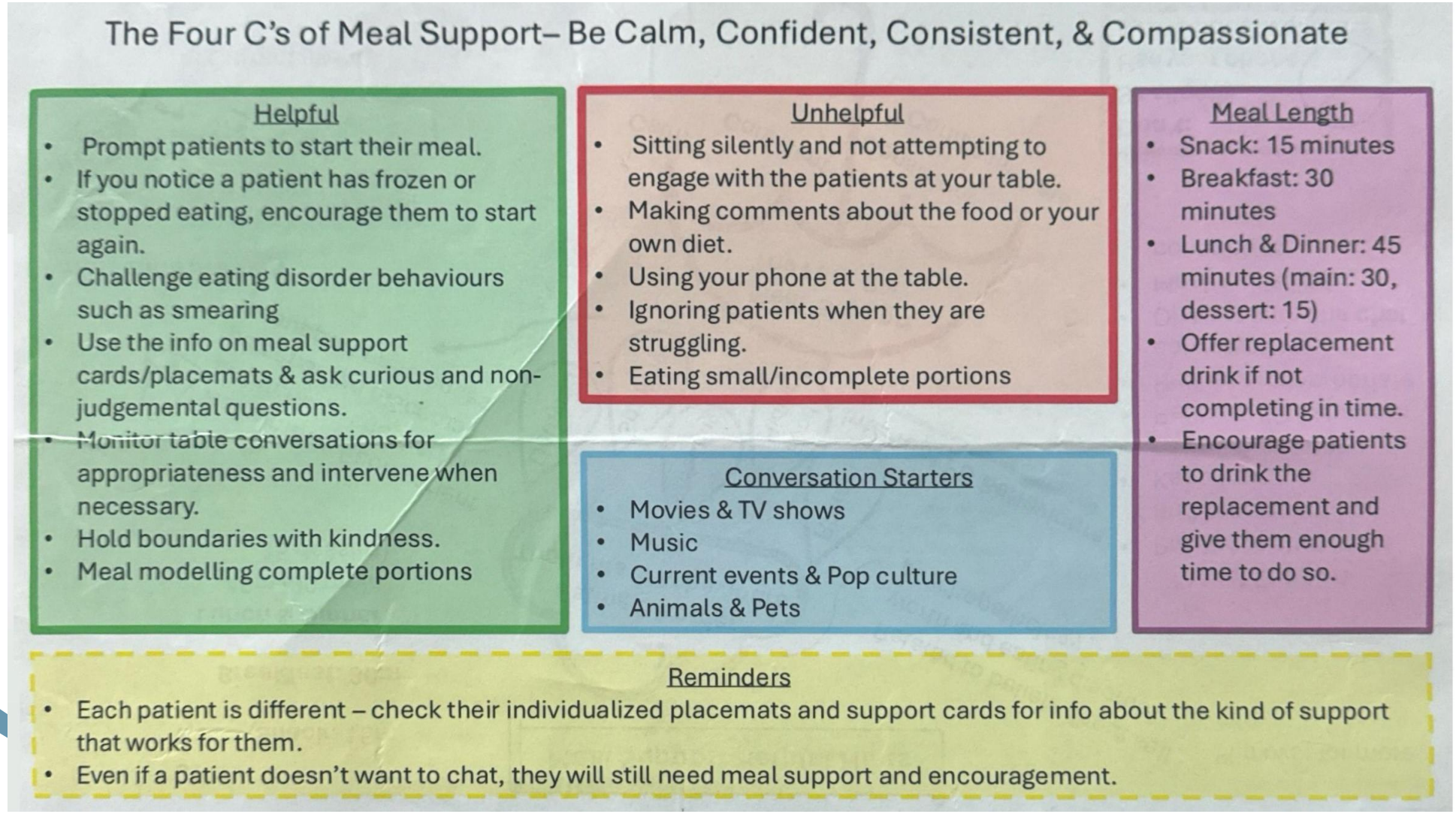
Example Dining Room Support Card



"Reassurance, distractions, reminders of goals + motivation"

"Firm boundaries, reminders of the 'why' and stern 'you need to do it' communication"

Staff Placemats – Verbal Side



The Four C's of Meal Support– Be Calm, Confident, Consistent, & Compassionate

Helpful

- Prompt patients to start their meal.
- If you notice a patient has frozen or stopped eating, encourage them to start again.
- Challenge eating disorder behaviours such as smearing
- Use the info on meal support cards/placemats & ask curious and non-judgemental questions.
- Monitor table conversations for appropriateness and intervene when necessary.
- Hold boundaries with kindness.
- Meal modelling complete portions

Unhelpful

- Sitting silently and not attempting to engage with the patients at your table.
- Making comments about the food or your own diet.
- Using your phone at the table.
- Ignoring patients when they are struggling.
- Eating small/incomplete portions

Meal Length

- Snack: 15 minutes
- Breakfast: 30 minutes
- Lunch & Dinner: 45 minutes (main: 30, dessert: 15)
- Offer replacement drink if not completing in time.
- Encourage patients to drink the replacement and give them enough time to do so.

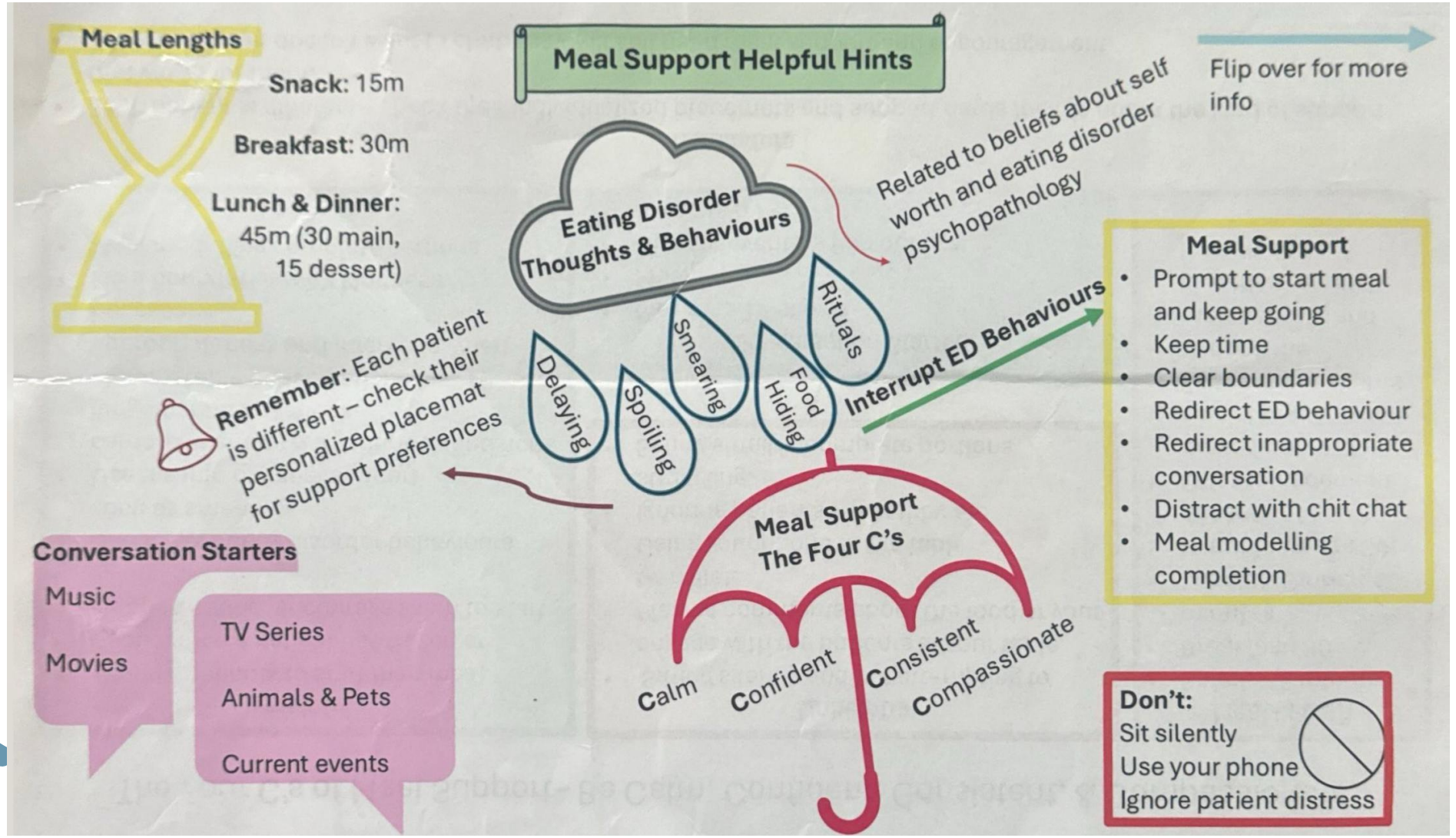
Conversation Starters

- Movies & TV shows
- Music
- Current events & Pop culture
- Animals & Pets

Reminders

- Each patient is different – check their individualized placemats and support cards for info about the kind of support that works for them.
- Even if a patient doesn't want to chat, they will still need meal support and encouragement.

Staff Placemats - Visual Side



Quick-Reference Keycards

Do's – Dining room support

- ✓ **Smile and encourage**! Use phrases like "We're here for you, and you're not alone", "I can see how hard it is.", "you are making the right decision by challenging yourself.", "you need this nutrition, it is safe to eat this."
- ✓ Engage with the patients as humans, talk about hobbies, goals, play word games (A-Z game)
- ✓ Offer support if patient is distressed, ask if they need support or if they are okay, give a nod or kind eye contact
- ✓ Eat a correct portion, complete the meal, eat normally
- ✓ Give helpful distractions, **be kind and compassionate but maintain boundaries.** Give gentle time prompts and encourage completion of meals.

Don'ts – Dining room support

- × Don't sit in silence or stare at patients or go on phone/iPad
- × Don't get up from the table/wonder around/use this as time for break or to just eat, **it is supported meal modelling with a purpose**
- × Don't talk about diets/unhealthy food/weight/being "too full"
- × **Don't ignore patient distress,** but offer support and kindness.
- × Don't use threatening words
- × Don't be offended if patients shout, swear or be abrupt with you, they are stressed and need understanding and patience
- × Don't be offended if a patient declines to talk

What's Changed?

- Increased predictability and reduced sensory overload
- Staff reporting greater confidence
- Patients feeling more understood and empowered
- Improved relational safety during meals

What is next?

- Easy read serving - staff facing document including guidelines for meal serving, replacements, timings, cutlery use and ED behaviours – being created with both MDT and nursing staff
- Trying to get more nurses involved and aware about PEACE to gain a more multidisciplinary understanding and further progress to embedding PEACE practically on the ward.

Thank you