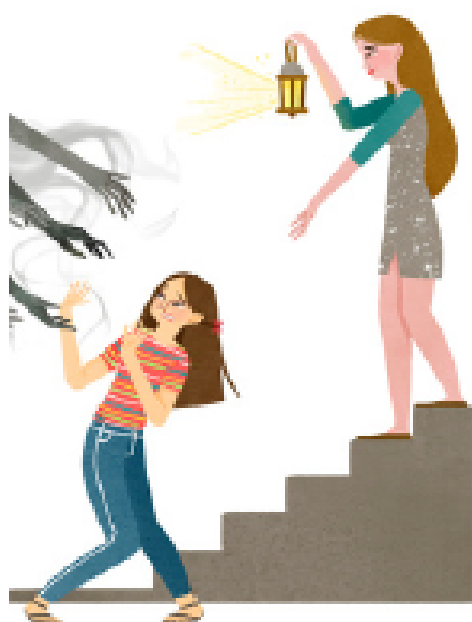


How to Use Eating Disorder Therapy Cards

A Transformational Approach to Treatment



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APT Therapeutic Solutions

WELCOME

In this course, you're not just learning how to use a tool—you're embracing a new way of connecting with adolescents living with anorexia. This is about changing how we understand, engage with, and support the young people we care for.

CLINICAL CONSIDERATIONS

- *These cards were developed for use by clinicians experienced in the field of eating disorders*
- *Anorexia Nervosa is a life-threatening illness. Treatment should always involve a team of professionals in particular a pediatrician or GP to ensure medical stability.*
- *A thorough assessment of the young person's mental state should always be undertaken prior to using these cards.*
- *Please use clinical discretion when using these cards. Younger children under 13 years of age may not understand the concepts and may be frightened by the cards. Likewise, neuro atypical adolescents may not understand the concepts.*
- *Disclaimer: All care has been taken in the preparation of the information presented. No responsibility can be accepted from the misinterpretation of this work.*



SECTION 1- INTRODUCTION

Thank you for choosing to invest your time in this tutorial on how to use the *Eating Disorder Therapy Cards*. Your presence here tells me that, like me, you're passionate about supporting young people in their journey toward recovery and self-discovery which I believe is the missing piece in most eating disorder treatments

Before we begin, let me introduce myself. I'm a Clinical Social Worker and a Child and Adolescent Psychoanalytic Psychotherapist. Over the years, I've had the privilege of working with children, adolescents, and families across a variety of settings. In 2000, I joined the specialist eating disorder team at the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne, Australia — and it was there that my deep commitment to the field of adolescent eating disorders truly began to take shape.

Since then, I've dedicated my work to advancing more compassionate and developmentally sensitive approaches to treatment — approaches that not only address the eating disorder but also honour the young person's identity, voice, and potential.

This tutorial was born out of conversations with many clinicians who reached out to ask how they could use the *Eating Disorder Therapy Cards* more intentionally and effectively. Whether you're just discovering these cards or have already woven them into your sessions, my hope is that this guide will offer fresh inspiration, practical insights, and new therapeutic possibilities.

In this course, I'll Walk you through the foundational principles behind the cards and share how I've used them with hundreds of adolescents and young adults. Time and again, I've seen how these cards invite self-reflection, spark emotional insight, and open space for creative, meaningful conversations.

One of the most powerful things about this resource is its flexibility. Every clinician brings their own voice, their own style — and every young person brings their own story, strengths, and struggles. These cards were designed to meet those unique and evolving needs.

In this course, you're not just learning how to use a tool – you will be embracing a new way of connecting with adolescents living with anorexia. This course is about changing how we understand, engage with, and support the young people we care for.

If you discover new ways of using the cards in your work, I'd love to hear from you. When we share what we learn, we build a richer, more responsive community of care — one that truly makes a difference in the lives of the young people we serve. I have set up a private Facebook page where you are welcome to join and share your knowledge or ask questions.

Let's begin and look at the benefits of using the Cards

Aims of the ED Therapy Cards?

The *ED Therapy Cards* were developed from over 20 years of clinical experience in the field and are a visually rich and psychologically grounded tool and informed by a wide evidence base. At their core, these cards were created with one purpose in mind and that is:



To help young people reconnect with themselves—and rediscover who they are beyond the eating disorder. The following benefits can also be attributed to their use

1. They support Psychological and Emotional Recovery

We know that eating disorders are not just about food. They are complex and multifaceted illnesses that affect how a person sees themselves and experiences the world which is usually a very narrow perspective.

Many of our clients carry a harsh inner voice, their personality traits can become quite rigid, and many have profound disconnection from their emotions and identity.

While nutritional rehabilitation is essential, it's not enough on its own. True recovery happens when we also address the psychological wounds—and that's where these cards come in.

2. The cards Provide a Window Into the Inner World

The cards also offer a creative, visual, and interactive way to explore the emotional and cognitive landscape of someone struggling with an eating disorder.

They provide a gentle structure for self-exploration, helping clients make sense of their traits, inner critics, emotional experiences, and untapped strengths.

and for many, this process brings language to feelings they couldn't previously name—and opens the door to new insights and possibilities.

3. Offer the concept of Head Space & Heart Space

The *Head Space* is the world of logic, rules, rigidity, and inner criticism. The *Heart Space* is where intuition, compassion, values, and emotional truth live.

This powerful framework invites clients to examine the inner conflict between these two spaces—and begin to move toward a more integrated, balanced way of being.

By learning to listen to both spaces, clients gain the insight and emotional flexibility they need to heal.

4. Foster Self-Acceptance

Ultimately, these cards are about more than just insight—They gently guide clients toward accepting all parts of themselves: their strengths, their struggles, their fears, and their hopes.

Because when a young person begins to see themselves with compassion, the eating disorder starts to lose its grip—and recovery becomes possible.

The ED Therapy Cards

The card set includes 60 cards across four categories:

- **There are 12 Trait Cards** that explore personality traits that may contribute to or maintain the eating disorder, while also highlighting how these traits can be reframed and used as strengths.
- **16 Critic Cards** that Identify the inner critical voices that dominate the "head space," reinforcing shame, fear, anxiety, and disordered behaviours.
- **26 Sage Cards** that Represent inner strengths, values, and intuitive resources—residing in the "heart space"—that support healing and help build a strong sense of self.
- **6 Emotion Cards** to Help clients reconnect with core emotions, develop emotional literacy, and understand how critics and sages influence their emotional world.

Versatility of the Cards



These therapy cards are very versatile and can be used in:

- Individual therapy with adolescents and young adults
- Group therapy within clinical or day program settings
- Psychoeducation for families and carers
- Assessment and formulation discussions
- Creative and reflective exercises such as journaling, art, or chair work

Research Underpinning the Creation of the Eating Disorder Therapy Cards

The development of the Eating Disorder Therapy Cards is grounded in a strong foundation of psychological and neurobiological research. Central to their design is the extensive literature on the presence and impact of inner critics, strategies for managing self-critical thoughts, the influence of personality traits, and the importance of aligning with personal values. In addition, the principles of Internal Family Systems (IFS) have provided valuable insights into the significance of exploring our internal parts—the protective roles they play, and the belief that all parts are good and valuable, and the path toward integration and self-leadership.

The cards are also heavily influenced by the work of Dan Siegal on the integration of self, identity, and belonging which is explained so well in his book “Intra-connected”. Individuals with eating disorders often function in a state of chronic threat and anxiety—disconnected from their core self and trapped in rigid, fear-based thinking. These cards aim to support a gentle shift from a survival-driven “Head Space,” dominated by control and overthinking, to a more connected, intuitive “Heart Space,” where self-compassion, emotional insight, and meaningful transformation can unfold.

The cards are also deeply informed by Steve Porges’ Polyvagal Theory, which emphasises the critical role of the autonomic nervous system in shaping emotional and behavioural responses. According to this theory, true healing and change can only occur when an individual experiences a felt sense of safety. The cards create a therapeutic opportunity for young people to better understand their nervous system and learn how to regulate it, fostering a foundation for connection, curiosity, and healing.

I highly recommend that you familiarize yourself with the work of these authors as it will add a richness to your work and understanding of young people.



SECTION 2- SETTING THE SCENE

Preparing the Client

Timing matters when introducing the cards.

1.Establish Safety & Trust

Before introducing the cards, it is essential to build a strong therapeutic alliance. Many individuals with eating disorders are highly sensitive, anxious, and self-critical. A foundation of relational safety will allow them to engage more openly with potentially vulnerable material. Consider the following:

- Has the client developed enough trust to explore internal experiences?
- Are they currently medically and emotionally stable enough to reflect on their inner world?
- Would they benefit from a slower pace or more directive support when beginning this work?

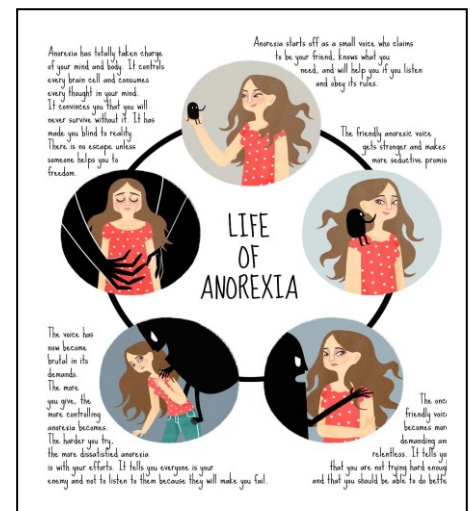
2.Understand the Strength of the Young Person’s Eating Disorder

It’s also helpful to understand the strength of the adolescent’s eating disorder and their relationship to it. If you’ve used the *Life of Anorexia Assessment Tool*, you’ll already have a sense of where the young person is positioned. If you haven’t please download the free tool and you are welcome to complete the free instruction course how to use the tool on this site.

3. Prepare Materials

You may wish to have the following available:

- The full set of cards, printed or displayed clearly
- A blank journal or worksheet for reflections
- Art materials (optional) for creative or expressive integration
- A camera or phone (with client’s permission) to photograph selected cards for later reference
- A private, comfortable space where cards can be laid out and interacted with easily



4.Understand the concept of the Head & Heart Space

It’s also essential to explain the concepts of the Head and Heart Space. These may be entirely new metaphors for the adolescent. I often introduce them by describing the internal tug-of-war many clients face and gently asking the young person whether this reflects their own experience.

We will discuss this later when we speak about setting the scene prior to introducing the cards. It’s important to let your clients know that:

- stepping into the Heart Space can feel risky—but they won’t be doing it alone. Their inner sages will support them. And so will you.



- staying in the Head Space may feel safe in the short term, but long-term growth, connection, and joy come from exploring the Heart Space. This is where their most authentic self can begin to emerge.

Guiding Principles When Using the Cards

1. Use Curiosity Over Correction

- “Help me understand...” is far more powerful than “You need to...”
Curiosity opens doors that correction shuts. When working with a young person who has lived under the weight of judgment—often their own—we must become different kinds of companions. Curious ones. Instead of challenging or correcting their beliefs, we can gently ask,
- “Where do you think that voice comes from?”
This shifts the dynamic from confrontation to collaboration. It says: I’m here with you, not above you.
- Curiosity honours the complexity of their inner world and allows space for insight to rise, not be imposed.

2. Invite Exploration Rather Than Offering Interpretation

- Young people don’t need another adult telling them what their thoughts mean—they need someone to wonder with them.
Interpreting too quickly can close off the rich terrain of self-discovery. Instead, when we offer a card, we are offering a mirror, not a map. A gentle prompt like,
- “Does this card feel familiar to you in any way?”
invites personal ownership of the experience. This principle reminds us: healing is not about giving answers—it’s about helping them ask the questions that matter most to *them*.

3. Support Integration

- These cards are not fragments—they are voices in a larger conversation within the self.
Often, young people feel torn between opposing inner forces: the Perfectionist vs. the Sage of Mastery, the Judge vs. the Sage of Compassion, the Inner Controller vs. the Sage of Trust.
- Recovery is not about silencing these voices but about helping the young person *make sense* of them. We aim to support integration—the process of bringing these internal parts into dialogue, understanding their functions, and ultimately guiding them toward harmony and healing.
- Each Trait and Inner Critic card has a corresponding Sage on the reverse side—this is intentional. The Sage offers an antidote, a regulating force, a more compassionate or courageous part of the self that can respond to the harsher, more rigid voice of the critic or trait. You might say:



- “How does your Sage of Compassion respond to the harsh voice of the Judge?”
“Can you feel what your Sage of Discovery might say to the part of you that feels it must always conform?”
- This dual-sided design reflects an important therapeutic truth: the eating disorder often hijacks traits and inner critics, turning them against the young person. What began as a way to protect or achieve becomes distorted—perfectionism turns punishing, control becomes obsessive, and fear becomes paralyzing. The cards help to externalize these dynamics, so the young person can begin to understand not just *what* is happening inside, but *why*—and what alternatives exist.
- The goal is not just awareness—it is integration. That means helping young people develop an internal system where different parts can be acknowledged, supported, and guided by wiser, compassionate inner voices. When integration happens, the eating disorder loses its grip. The young person begins to lead from their Sage selves—not from fear, shame, or rigid rules, but from a growing sense of self-trust, meaning, and connection.

4. Provide a Balanced Interpretation (Pros & Cons) of Traits & Inner Critic Cards

- Every inner critic was once a protector. Every trait holds a gift, and a burden. When we speak about traits like perfectionism or criticism, we must resist the urge to label them as simply “bad.” These parts often arose to protect, manage, or control overwhelming feelings. We honour their intention, while gently exploring their unintended consequences.
- “How has this trait helped you survive? And where might it be holding you back now?”
This helps the young person move from shame to understanding, from blame to choice.

5. Respect Readiness

- Pacing is everything. Just because we’re ready doesn’t mean *they* are. In therapy—and especially in recovery—readiness is sacred. Sometimes a card will land deeply. Other times it will be met with silence, avoidance, or even discomfort. That’s okay. We are not here to push; we are here to attune. To wait at the doorway of their inner world until they are ready to invite us in.
- “*Would it feel okay to sit with this card today? Or shall we choose another one?*”
This kind of permission says: *I see you. I trust you. And I will walk at your pace, not mine.*

6. Reinforce Strengths

- In a world that so often tells them they are not enough, we become mirrors of what is already strong, already whole, already trying. The Sage cards and the emotion cards are powerful tools to reflect back what is good, capable, and courageous. Even in moments of struggle, we can name the effort:
- “*It sounds like your Sage of Discovery is peeking through—you’re listening to yourself in a new way.*”
This principle is about building a bridge to identity beyond the eating disorder. It’s about planting seeds of hope, confidence, and possibility—until the young person can water them on their own.



Order of Introduction

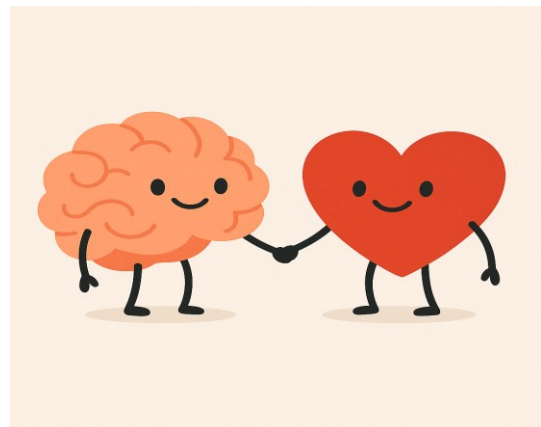
1. **The first step is Setting the Scene by introducing the Head & Heart Space.** We will talk about how to do this in the next slide and you can also download an example script, but feel free to come up with your own explanation
2. **Begin with Trait Cards:**
These provide a neutral and relatable entry point. Clients often feel seen and validated by trait exploration, especially when traits are reframed as both strengths and vulnerabilities.
3. **Progress to Critic Cards:**
Once clients are familiar with their traits they are often ready to identify the inner voices that distort their thinking and undermine their self-worth.
4. **Sage Cards:**
These represent the positive, compassionate, and grounded internal voices clients often struggle to access. Introduce the Sages to following discussions about traits and inner critics as the sages provide the counterbalance to those cards and help anchor recovery identity.
5. **Introduce Emotion Cards as Needed:**
These can be introduced early alongside all other cards. Use them to support emotional naming, processing, and mind-body connection. E.g. “how does that inner critic make you feel”

Note: Some clients may respond more easily to certain card types. It's acceptable to adapt the order or return to previous card sets as needed.

Introducing the "Head Space" and "Heart Space"

The Integration of Head and Heart Space

The concept of *Head Space* and *Heart Space* is not new—but in the context of eating disorders, it offers a powerful metaphor for the internal struggle many young people face. Eating disorders often manifest as a battle between these two inner landscapes: the rational, rule-bound *Head Space* and the emotionally rich, intuitive *Heart Space*. The **Eating Disorder Therapy Cards** provide a unique and skilful way to explore this inner terrain in a safe and meaningful way.



The *Head Space* is governed by analytical thinking—rigid, rule-based, and detail-focused. It craves certainty and control. It's the home of perfectionism, overthinking, and harsh self-criticism. For many adolescents, this space becomes a stronghold. It offers predictability—and predictability, in the adolescent brain, equates to safety. Although this top-down mode of functioning can be mentally and emotionally draining, it creates a scaffolding that feels protective. The brain's survival circuits thrive on anticipating outcomes, so beliefs like “If I do everything perfectly, no one can hurt me,” or “If I gain weight, I'll be rejected,” become silent mantras. These



unspoken rules offer a false promise of safety—yet over time, they begin to shape a distorted and one-dimensional sense of self, defined more by fear than by authenticity.

In contrast, the *Heart Space* is the realm of intuitive wisdom—a bottom-up process grounded in emotional connection. It's where values, longings, creativity, and a sense of meaning arise. It is also the home of the *inner sages*—those calm, compassionate inner voices that speak of courage, connection, and possibility. This space holds the capacity to form a more cohesive and integrated sense of self—one that honours the full spectrum of human emotion and experience.

But for many adolescents, stepping into the Heart Space feels dangerous. Vulnerability lives here—raw, unpredictable, and painfully real. To enter this space is to risk being seen, to face the ache of disappointment, rejection, or failure. It's where uncertainty resides—and where safety cannot be guaranteed. For someone already feeling fragile and exposed, the Heart Space can feel overwhelming. And so, despite the cost, many adolescents remain anchored in the Head Space—trading aliveness for the illusion of control.

It's important to understand that neither space is *good* or *bad*. Each provides distinct functions and ways of seeing and experiencing the world. The *Head Space* helps organise, analyse, and protect; the *Heart Space* allows us to connect, feel, and dream. When these two inner landscapes work in harmony, they offer a richer, more dimensional experience of life—one that deepens our relationships, enhances our capacity for growth, and helps us discover who we truly are.

Healing comes not from choosing one over the other, but from integration—from learning to move fluidly between top-down and bottom-up processes, so that thinking and feeling can work together in service of wholeness.

The **Eating Disorder Therapy Cards** gently support this integration. Through metaphor, imagery, and guided reflection, they help reduce the dominance of inner critics, strengthen the voice of inner sages, and invite a more balanced inner dialogue. Over time, adolescents can begin to embody a fuller, more compassionate understanding of themselves—one that draws strength from both the clarity of the mind and the wisdom of the heart.

This integration—where Head and Heart are no longer at war, but in conversation—is where healing and wholeness begin.

Therapeutic Goals When Introducing the Head and Heart Space

This guide is designed to support clinicians in facilitating the Head and Heart Space framework with adolescents in eating disorder treatment. It outlines therapeutic goals, offers reflective prompts, and provides clinical tips grounded in trauma-informed and developmental approaches.

1. Increase Self-Awareness

- Help the adolescents identify when they are operating from Head Space (logical, analytical, safety-driven) vs. Heart Space (intuitive, emotional, relational).
- Encourage recognition of the internal dialogue between thoughts and feelings. Help them name the 'voices' within (e.g., over-controller, fear monger, doubter, curiosity).
- Clinical Tips:
 - Ask: "Which part of you is leading right now—your head or your heart?"



- Create a visual two-column map in-session: “Head says vs. Heart says.”
- Use somatic cues: “When you’re in Head Space, what does your body feel like? Tight jaw? Fast heartbeat? What about when you’re in Heart Space?”

2. Enhance Emotional Literacy

- Support the adolescent in naming, describing, and locating emotions that arise from the Heart Space.
- Explore how prolonged Head Space can lead to numbness, anxiety, or detachment.
- Clinical Tips:
 - Pair with Emotion Cards. Prompt: “If your Heart Space had a color or weather today, what would it be?”
 - Use an 'emotional thermometer' to track how quickly they shift into cognitive control during distress.
 - Ask them to draw their Heart Space—what does it look like, feel like, sound like?

3. Normalize Internal Conflict

- Validate the tension between Head (control, perfectionism) and Heart (authenticity, vulnerability) as expected and necessary.
- Reframe this conflict as a sign of internal growth—not failure.
- Clinical Tips:
 - Use IFS language: “It sounds like two parts of you are both trying to protect you—can we be curious about both?”
 - Ask: “What would happen if your Head let go of control, even for a moment?”
 - Normalize: “Many people in recovery experience this tug-of-war—it’s a sign that you’re waking up emotionally.”

4. Develop Compassionate Inner Dialogue

- Introduce the Inner Sage as a kind, wise, supportive internal presence that integrates thinking and feeling.
- Practice compassionate self-talk scripts (e.g., “I’m doing my best, and that’s enough today”).
- Clinical Tips:
 - Use role-play: Have the adolescent voice their Inner Critic, then switch chairs and respond as their Sage.
 - Draw or write letters from the Sage to the Head or Heart.
 - Use mantra building: “My head keeps me safe, my heart keeps me real.”

5. Broaden Perspective-Taking

- Illustrate how Head Space often filters the world through rules, rigidity, and fear of mistakes.
- Help them practice Heart-led perspectives: “What would your kindest self say?” or “What’s the bigger picture here?”
- Clinical Tips:
 - Use narrative therapy: Ask, “What story is your Head telling? What story would your Heart write?”
 - Create 'Heart Space Lenses'—use metaphorical glasses or a frame and ask them to look at situations through it.



- Use ACT’s self-as-context: “Step back and notice—what does this part of you believe? Can you hold it with compassion?”

6. Foster Identity Exploration and Authenticity

- Invite the adolescent to explore aspects of self that have been silenced by fear, shame, or social pressure.
- Emphasize values and dreams as emerging from the Heart Space, helping shape an authentic self.
- Clinical Tips:
 - Use expressive arts: Invite them to create a collage or playlist from their Heart Space.
 - Ask: “If you weren’t afraid of judgment, what would you say or do?”
 - Explore: “When do you feel most like yourself? Where do you hide that version of you?”

7. Strengthen Integration and Flexibility

- Promote balance between top-down processing (logic, planning) and bottom-up processing (emotion, body signals).
- Encourage flexible movement—using Head for tasks, Heart for connection.
- Clinical Tips:
 - Use a traffic light metaphor: Red (Heart overwhelm), Green (Heart and Head aligned), Yellow (Head dominating, warning signs).
 - Ask: “Can your Head step aside for a moment so we can hear your Heart?”
 - Use body awareness: “What happens in your chest or stomach when your Head takes over?”

8. Reduce Avoidance of Emotional Experience

- Gently challenge avoidance strategies that keep the adolescent 'safe' but disconnected from emotions.
- Increase tolerance for vulnerability and emotional openness.
- Clinical Tips:
 - Normalize: “Avoiding emotions makes sense when they feel overwhelming. But your Heart has things to say, too.”
 - Use titrated exposure: Ask for a 'peek' into the Heart Space rather than full immersion.
 - Practice journaling Heart thoughts with no judgment—just notice and hold.

9. Reinforce Relational Safety

- Explore attachment needs—being seen, understood, accepted—through Heart Space reflections.
- Model safety through attuned presence, validation, and repair.
- Clinical Tips:
 - Use polyvagal-informed grounding: “Let’s notice what it feels like to be safe here, together.”
 - Reflect: “I noticed your voice got softer—what happened inside when I really listened to you?”
 - Co-regulate: Use slow breathing or grounding touch to support emotional safety when exploring Heart Space.

10. Support Meaning-Making and Recovery Motivation

- Help the adolescents uncover values and inner longings that can serve as anchors in recovery.



- Use the Heart Space to deepen purpose, identity, and intrinsic motivation.
- Clinical Tips:
 - Use future-self imagery: “Imagine your 25-year-old self is watching you right now. What does your Heart want for that version of you?”
 - Invite: “What kind of life do you want to recover for?”
 - Prompt journaling: “What matters more than being thin or perfect?”

Example of Clinician Script: Introducing Head Space & Heart Space to an Adolescent

Clinician speaking gently, perhaps with a visual aid or using the Eating Disorder Therapy Cards as support:

“I want to introduce you to something that might help us understand what’s going on inside you. It’s a way of thinking about the different ‘spaces’ we all have within us—what I call the Head Space and the Heart Space.

These two spaces are kind of like inner landscapes. We all move between them, sometimes without even realising it. In the work we will do together I’d like you to take notice which space you’re in—and what that space is telling you.

Let me explain the spaces. The Head Space is where your thinking brain lives. It’s logical, structured, and focused on details. This space likes rules, routines, and predictability. It tries to keep you safe by figuring things out, analysing everything, and preparing for what might go wrong. It’s also the place where perfectionism and self-criticism often show up—those thoughts like, “I have to get this exactly right,” or “If I mess this up, something bad will happen.”

Now, the Head Space isn’t bad—it actually plays an important role. It helps you plan, study, make decisions, and make sense of the world. But it tends to be narrow in its focus—it zooms in, trying to control the outcome and reduce uncertainty which can be useful at times. However, when you get stuck in the Head Space, it can feel like you’re living inside a tight tunnel—everything is about avoiding mistakes, keeping people happy, or staying in control. It limits how you see yourself and how you relate to others. You might find yourself thinking in absolutes: “I must succeed,” or “If I gain weight, no one will like me.”

By contrast, your Heart Space opens things up. This is where your values, longings, and emotional truth live. It’s a broader, more relational way of seeing the world—one that includes not just what you do, but who you are. It helps you tune in to how you feel, what really matters to you, and how you want to connect with others. The Heart Space is also home to your inner sages—those calm, wise parts of you that speak from compassion, curiosity, and courage.

When you think from the Heart Space, it allows you to step back and see life from a wider perspective. It brings in more colour, more connection. Instead of just seeing your worth in how well you perform, you start to recognise the importance of relationships, meaning, creativity, and self-kindness. The Heart Space reminds you that you’re not just here to meet expectations—you’re here to grow, feel, express, and be fully human.

That said, stepping into the Heart Space can feel really vulnerable. It’s the place where uncertainty lives—where you have to risk being seen, risk being wrong, or not having everything under control. And



when you've been hurt, rejected, or shamed before, this space can feel threatening. That's why many young people get stuck in the Head Space—it feels safer, even if it's lonely or exhausting.

But here's what's important: neither space is right or wrong. Each has a purpose. The Head Space helps you feel structured and safe; the Heart Space helps you feel connected and alive. When the two work together—when thinking and feeling are in conversation—you begin to experience a fuller version of yourself.

So, in our work together, we're not trying to shut one down. We're learning how to balance them. To notice when your Head is taking over and might need some kindness from your Heart. Or when your Heart is trying to speak up but is being drowned out by fear or perfectionism.

The **Eating Disorder Therapy Cards** will help us explore all of this. They're here to help you understand your inner world—your traits, your critics, your emotions, your sages. And over time, as you begin to move between these spaces more freely, you'll start to feel a greater sense of wholeness and self-understanding.

And that's where real change begins—not in choosing one space over the other, but in learning how to let both guide you, together."

SECTION 3 – HOW TO USE THE CARDS

The Trait Cards

The **Trait Cards** provide an entry point into therapeutic work that feels safe, validating, and empowering. They help clients explore and understand the personality traits that shape their thinking, emotions, behaviours as well as their world/self-perspective. Keep in mind that certain traits may have contributed to both the development and maintenance of their eating disorder. The goal is not to "fix" traits, but to **foster self-awareness** and **reframe traits as tools for growth**.

Clients often overidentify with, or overvalue certain traits, like perfectionism or conscientiousness, because these traits have served them well in certain contexts (e.g., academic achievement, compliance and feeling safe). However, these same traits may also entrench disordered behaviours and thinking. The Trait Cards allow clients to explore this duality.



Therapeutic Goals – Trait Cards

1. Increase self-awareness around personality functioning

Many adolescents with eating disorders are unaware of how their personality traits—such as perfectionism, sensitivity, or conscientiousness—shape their thoughts, behaviours, and reactions. This card set brings those traits into conscious awareness, offering a non-judgmental mirror for young people to reflect on *how they typically function in the world*. It opens space to ask:

- "Is this trait driving me, or am I guiding it?"
- "Is this trait helping me or exhausting me?"

By increasing self-awareness, clients can start to observe patterns rather than feel trapped by them.



2. Reframe traits from “good or bad” to “adaptive or maladaptive”

Adolescents often see themselves in black-and-white terms: “I’m too much,” “I’m not enough,” or “I’m broken.” This goal challenges that narrative. Instead of labelling traits as inherently “bad” (e.g., stubbornness or control), clinicians guide the adolescent to see these qualities as *adaptive responses* that may have once served a protective function.

For example:

- “Your drive for control helped you cope when everything felt uncertain.”
 - “Your perfectionism gave you a sense of order in chaos.”
- This reframe allows for compassion and curiosity, not shame, and opens the door to healing.

3. Identify how traits may maintain eating disorder behaviours

Eating disorders often *hijack* personality traits and use them to maintain disordered behaviours. Traits like self-discipline, high standards, or emotional inhibition can be exploited by the eating disorder to reinforce rigid rules, denial of needs, and avoidance of vulnerability.

Using the cards, clinicians and clients can collaboratively explore:

- “How does this trait feed the eating disorder voice?”
 - “In what ways does this trait keep me stuck?”
- This insight allows the adolescent to begin separating their *core self* from the *eating disorder-driven self*.

4. Explore ways to use traits constructively in support of recovery



Every trait has a *spectrum*. What makes a trait harmful or helpful is how and when it's used. This goal empowers young people to reclaim their traits—such as determination, sensitivity, or loyalty—and learn how to *redirect them* toward recovery goals.

Examples include:

- Using conscientiousness to stick to meal plans
 - Turning sensitivity into greater empathy for self
 - Channelling perseverance into facing fears or rebuilding relationships
- This approach shifts the narrative from “this part of me is the problem” to “this part of me can be part of the solution.”

5. Begin a narrative shift from “flawed self” to “resourceful self”

At the heart of this work is *identity transformation*. Adolescents with eating disorders often feel deeply flawed, ashamed, or broken. The trait cards support the gradual development of a more integrated and empowered sense of self—where previously criticized traits are seen as *resources in disguise*.

The therapeutic shift sounds like:

- “I’m not weak—I’m deeply thoughtful.”
 - “I’m not controlling—I crave safety and order.”
 - “I’m not a failure—I’m learning to use my traits with more flexibility.”
- This new narrative becomes a foundation for long-term resilience, authenticity, and connection to self.

Introduction – When & How

Trait Cards should be introduced **early in treatment**—but only after the clinician has developed sufficient rapport and established emotional safety.

Sample Introduction Script

“Everybody functions in different ways which we generally refer to as our personality traits. Sometimes our personality traits become our preferred way of functioning and sometimes these preferred ways can develop as a coping mechanism. Our personality traits shape how we think, feel, and respond to the world. These traits are usually consistent over time and become part of how we see ourselves. Some traits can be incredibly helpful, but when overused or hijacked by our eating disorder, they can sometimes keep us stuck. While traits are our preferred way of functioning, they are not set in concrete, we have choices how we use them. These cards can help us look at those traits in a more curious way and we can see what’s working and not working for you.” Are you ready to give it a go”, or “Do you want to give this discovery journey a try?”

1. Lay out all 12 Trait Cards and invite the client to:
 - Choose the traits they feel describe them most. If there are more than 3, ask them to pick 3 that resonate with them the most.
 - Should they struggle with identifying cards, they can identify traits they’ve been told they have by others. Perhaps they need further explanation of the cards.



- They can also select traits they feel conflicted about
2. Ask gentle, exploratory questions that look at the pros and cons:
 - “When did you first notice this trait?”
 - “How has this trait helped you in your life?”
 - “What are the benefits?”
 - “What does it take away from you?”
 - “When has it made things harder?”
 - “What happens when this trait takes over?”
 3. Invite reflection:
 - “Do you think this trait plays a role in your eating disorder/life?”
 - “How do you feel when this trait is in the driver’s seat?”
 - “Are there times you wish this trait wasn’t so strong?”

Key Clinical Insights – Trait Cards

1. Validate Before Challenging

Deeper Explanation:

Traits like perfectionism, control, self-denial, or emotional suppression are often central to how an adolescent has learned to feel safe, worthy, or in control—especially in the face of chaos, trauma, or emotional overwhelm. These traits can feel like *lifelines*, not liabilities.

Therefore, before suggesting change, clinicians must first **validate the purpose these traits have served**. This involves empathic statements like:

- “It makes sense that perfectionism helped you feel more in control.”
- “Self-denial may have made you feel stronger or less vulnerable when things felt out of control.”

When we honour the *adaptive origins* of these traits, we create psychological safety. Without this step, adolescents may feel misunderstood, judged, or defensive, and may shut down rather than explore change.

2. Normalise Complexity

Deeper Explanation:

Many adolescents view themselves through a binary lens: “I’m either good or bad,” “This trait is helpful or harmful.” Part of the therapeutic role is to introduce nuance. Traits like rigidity, sensitivity, or harm avoidance are not pathological in and of themselves—they become problematic when used rigidly, excessively, or unconsciously.

For example:

- “Your sensitivity isn’t a weakness—it’s a strength when used wisely.”



- “Control isn’t bad, but when it dominates all areas of life, it can become a prison.”

Using psychoeducation, clinicians can explain how **temperamental traits are part of our biological wiring**, but the *way we relate to them* can shift. This destigmatises the adolescent’s experience and moves therapy away from blame and toward integration.

3. Link to Eating Disorder Maintenance

Deeper Explanation:

Personality traits can be key drivers in the *function and maintenance* of the eating disorder. The eating disorder doesn’t create these traits—but it often **hijacks them**, twisting their original purpose to serve its own agenda. Traits that may have once helped the adolescent feel safe, competent, or in control become tools the eating disorder uses to reinforce harmful behaviours.

For instance:

- **Rigidity** → used to justify strict food rules or routines
- **Perfectionism** → fuels relentless pursuit of thinness or control
- **Anxiety** → reinforces avoidance of feared eating situations
- **Conscientiousness** → co-opted into obsessive calorie counting or exercise routines

Clinicians can help adolescents **make these links visible** in a non-shaming way, encouraging insight through compassionate curiosity.

For example:

“How do you think your high standards or need for certainty get pulled into the eating disorder’s patterns?”

Understanding this dynamic lays the foundation for reclaiming those traits for healing.

4. Reframe for Recovery

Deeper Explanation:

The goal is not to eliminate traits, but to *redeploy them* in ways that support recovery and a more flexible, values-based life. This is the heart of the strength-based approach.

Examples of clinical reframes include:

- “Your attention to detail is what’s helping you prepare balanced meals.”
- “Your drive for mastery can help you learn how to cope with urges or setbacks.”
- “That same persistence you’ve used in restricting can now help you commit to recovery, even on hard days.”

This shift empowers the adolescent to see themselves as **resourceful and capable**, rather than flawed or disordered. It invites them to form a new identity—one where the eating disorder is no longer the only place their strengths feel useful or validated.

Suggested Activities – Trait Cards



- **Trait Mapping Worksheet:** Create a chart that shows how each trait helps, hinders, and can be used differently in recovery.
- **Trait Sculpting (in groups):** Use art materials or role play to show how certain traits “stand in the way” of progress.
- **Trait Dialogue:**
 - Invite the client to write/reflect in their own journal or the accompanying treatment journal - Letting Go of ED, Embracing ME.
 - Invite the client to write a short dialogue between themselves and a trait (e.g., “Dear Perfectionism, why do you push me so hard?”).
- **Card Sorting Exercise:**
 - “Traits I rely on too much”
 - “Traits I want to develop more”
 - “Traits I think the ED uses against me”
- **Pairing the Trait Card:** On the back of the trait card there is an explanation of the trait; how ED uses this trait to work against you; and how you can use this trait as an opportunity for growth. There is also a small section that pairs the trait with several Sages – How the Sages work for you and against ED. Later you can use the Sage Cards to help the young person conceptualise the heart space with the Sage of their choice.

These are just a few examples of activities, but I encourage you to be creative and tailor them to your adolescent’s unique learning style and curiosity. The young person may also wish to rename certain cards to reflect their own language or perspective—and that’s perfectly okay, as long as the underlying therapeutic goals remain aligned with your intended outcomes.

Clinical Cautions – Trait Cards

- Some clients may feel ashamed or defensive about certain traits (especially impulsivity, sensitivity, or agreeableness). Avoid labelling; instead, use reflective listening and curiosity
- For highly self-critical clients, emphasise that no trait is inherently bad—it’s how the trait is used and in what context that matters.
- Be mindful of trauma histories. Traits like hypervigilance or harm-avoidance may have protective origins.

The Inner Critic Cards

The **Inner Critic Cards** are designed to help adolescents identify and externalise internal self-critical voices that contribute to shame, fear, self-doubt, and emotional distress.

These internal voices—present in all of us—often operate automatically and silently in the background. However, when they become loud, intrusive, and relentless, they can exert a powerful influence: fuelling harsh self-judgment, reinforcing eating disorder rules, and undermining recovery. These critical



voices frequently **ally themselves with the anorexic voice**, amplifying cognitive distortions and rigid thinking e.g.,

“You’re disgusting for eating that.”

“You’ll never be good enough unless you lose more weight.”

“You must follow the rules or everything will fall apart.”

Adolescents may mistakenly believe these voices are “truth” or see them as core parts of who they are.

The purpose of the cards is to make these inner critics *visible, concrete, and separate from the self*—a process known as **externalisation**, which lays the groundwork for insight, self-compassion, and therapeutic change.

Therapeutic Goals – Inner Critics

1. Create emotional distance from the Inner Critic

Externalising the Inner Critic allows the adolescent to step back and view the voice as just *one part* of their inner world—not the whole story of who they are. This shift creates emotional distance and opens space for curiosity, dialogue, and change.

For example:

- “That sounds like the voice of your Judge—what is it saying to you right now?”
- “What does your Inner Critic want you to believe? And how does that affect your behaviour?”



By naming the Inner Critic (e.g., The Judge, The Controller, The Conformer), adolescents begin to **observe rather than obey**. This enables therapeutic conversations about where the voice may have originated, what function it serves, and whether it is still helpful—or harmful.

This emotional distance makes it easier for the young person to observe the critic with curiosity rather than becoming overwhelmed or fused with its message. It lays the groundwork for reflection and therapeutic engagement.

2. Help the adolescent understand its origin and protective intent

Many Inner Critics emerge as protective mechanisms—formed in response to stress, trauma, fear of failure, or unmet attachment needs. For example, The Perfectionist may have developed to gain approval, or The Conformer to avoid rejection.

Understanding this **protective origin** fosters self-compassion and opens the door to asking, “*Is this part still helping me, or is it hurting me now?*”

This reframing shifts the tone from blame to insight, reducing resistance to change and promoting a more integrated self-narrative.



3. Strengthen inner dialogue by inviting the voice of the Sage to respond

Once the critic is identified and externalised, the next step is to **support the development of an alternative internal voice**—a Sage. Sages (e.g., Compassion, Courage, Wisdom, Trust) offer balance, warmth, and wise counterpoints to the critic’s harshness.

By strengthening this inner dialogue, the adolescent begins to practise self-talk that is more helpful, realistic, and emotionally regulated.

Therapeutically, this models a **new relational experience within the self**—one rooted in support, not punishment.

4. Increase agency and choice around which voices they listen to and why

Adolescents with eating disorders often feel controlled by their thoughts—especially the eating disorder voice and its aligned critics. The goal is to help them realise they have **choices** about which internal voices to believe, follow, or challenge.

By mapping out these internal parts, adolescents develop greater **agency** and **autonomy**, learning to ask:

- “Does this voice support my recovery or hold me back?”
- “What would happen if I listened to my Sage instead?”

This shift from automatic reactivity to mindful choice is a powerful step toward psychological flexibility and empowerment in recovery.

Suggestions for First Use

When and How to Introduce

Critic Cards are best introduced **after the client has worked with their traits and emotions**, and once a foundation of trust and self-awareness has been established. These cards often evoke vulnerable material and should be approached with care.

Sample Introduction Script

“Many people with eating disorders experience a harsh inner voice that constantly criticises them. Often, there are multiple critical voices inside our head—each with its own message, tone, and impact. These voices might sound like they’re protecting us, but they often make us feel small, anxious, or ashamed. These cards help us explore those inner critics in a way that can be really enlightening—and freeing.” Integrate this with the information you have already collected from the “Life of Anorexia Assessment Sheet” which looks at the anorexic voice.

1. Lay out all 16 Inner Critic Cards and ask:

- “Which of these voices feels familiar?”



- “Have you heard any of these in your mind lately?”
 - “Are there critics that come out more when you’re struggling with food or body image?”
2. Once critics are identified, explore:
- What does this critic say?
 - When does it usually show up?
 - What emotion does it create in you?
 - Where in your body do you feel it?
3. Use the descriptions on the back of the cards to expand understanding and deepen the discussion.

Key Clinical Insights – Inner Critics

- **Externalisation:** Encourage clients to speak about the critic as an “it” or a separate part of them. Give critics names or personas if helpful.
- **Protective Function:** Highlight that most critics originally evolved to protect (e.g., from shame, failure, or rejection). This helps clients relate to them with less fear and more curiosity.
- **Critic-Trait Interaction:** Show how critics can manipulate traits (e.g., “Your perfectionism is being hijacked by the Judge”).
- **ED Voice as a Team of Critics:** Help clients see that the eating disorder voice is not one voice—it’s often a collection of critics working together.

Suggested Activities – Inner Critics

- **Name Your Critics:** Clients choose 2–3 cards and give each critic a name, personality, or even a drawing (e.g., “The Drill Sergeant” or “The Shadow”).
- **Critic Timeline:** Explore when each critic first appeared. “Did this voice show up in childhood, adolescence, after trauma?”
- **Critic Dialogue:**
 - Invite the young person to write/reflect in their own journal or the accompanying APT treatment journal - Letting Go of ED, Embracing ME.
 - Invite young person to write or speak a conversation between themselves and the critic (or later between a critic and a sage).
- **Visualisation Exercise:** “Imagine your critic. What does it look like? How close is it standing to you? What happens when you take a step back?”
- **Critic-Emotion Link:** After identifying a critic, ask the client to choose an Emotion Card to represent the feeling that critic provokes.

Clinical Cautions - Inner Critics



- **Avoid Shame:** Clients may feel exposed, ashamed, or overwhelmed when their inner critic is voiced aloud. Normalize this experience by explaining that everyone has internal critical voices—especially under stress or during adolescence. Emphasize that these voices are not signs of failure, but patterns that can be understood and reshaped.
- **Watch for Over-Identification:** Adolescents may internalize the critic’s voice as a reflection of their identity or personal truth. Gently support externalization by reinforcing, “This is a part of you, not the whole of you,” or “That’s a voice you’ve learned over time—not who you truly are.” Visual or metaphor-based tools (e.g., characterizing the critic) can aid this process. Here are a few examples of what that might look like in practice:
 - a) **Characterising the critic:** Ask the adolescent to *imagine* or *draw* their inner critic as a character—like a judge, bully, parrot, robot, or shadow. This helps them see it as *a part with a voice*, not as their whole identity.
 - b) **Naming the critic:** Some adolescents find it helpful to give their critic a name—like “The Perfectionist,” “The Controller,” or even something playful like “Nagzilla.” This makes it easier to dialogue with and set boundaries around the critic’s voice.
 - c) **Using metaphors:** You might say, “That critic is like a loudspeaker that turns up when you’re anxious,” or “It’s like a fog that hides your strengths.” These images help the young person emotionally and cognitively differentiate from the critic.
- **Prepare for Resistance:** Some clients may initially align with or defend their critic—believing it provides control, motivation, or safety. Honour this ambivalence. Rather than challenging the critic outright, explore its protective role: “What do you think this voice is trying to protect you from?” or “Has this voice ever helped you feel safer or more prepared?” This helps shift the frame from judgment to curiosity and opens space for change.
- **Monitor Emotional Regulation:** Activating inner critics can trigger emotional flooding or shutdown, especially for trauma-affected clients. Track the adolescent’s nervous system cues and pace the work accordingly. Invite grounding strategies or call in the Sage voice to maintain emotional safety and balance.

The Sage Cards

Why Sages Matter in Treatment

Adolescence is a crucial stage of development marked by the search for identity—figuring out *who I am*, *what I believe*, and *how I want to show up in the world*. This process is complex even under typical circumstances, but for adolescents with anorexia, the task of identity formation is often hijacked by the illness. The eating disorder imposes rigid ideals, self-critical voices, and controlling behaviours that drown out emerging aspects of the self—leaving the young person feeling lost, unworthy, or disconnected from who they are becoming.

The *Sage Cards* were created to gently support adolescents in reclaiming and discovering their true self—the parts that may be hidden, silenced, or as yet unnamed. These cards draw from the **heart**



space—the place within us that holds wisdom, intuition, compassion, and emotional truth. From this space, the adolescent can begin to reconnect with their inner knowing, values, and potential, beyond the noise of the eating disorder.

Each Sage represents a different guiding quality—like curiosity, trust, compassion, or resilience—that helps restore balance to the adolescent’s internal world. These are not just traits to be admired but are internal resources that can be accessed, nurtured, and integrated into the recovery process.

The overarching goal of the *Sage Cards* is to facilitate **identity development, emotional integration,** and a renewed sense of possibility. They invite the adolescent to step out of rigid self-concepts shaped by fear, perfectionism, or external expectations, and instead step into a fuller, more authentic version of themselves.

Goals of the Sage Cards

Adolescents with anorexia often become fused with harsh internal voices—those of fear, control, or perfectionism. These voices are loud, relentless, and punishing, suppressing the adolescent’s natural growth, emotional expression, and evolving sense of identity. The *Sage Cards* provide a compassionate and structured way to bring forward the adolescent’s inner voice—the part of them that is capable of healing, connecting, and imagining a life beyond the eating disorder.

Through using the Sage Cards, clinicians can support adolescents to:

- 1. Reignite a sense of identity beyond the illness**

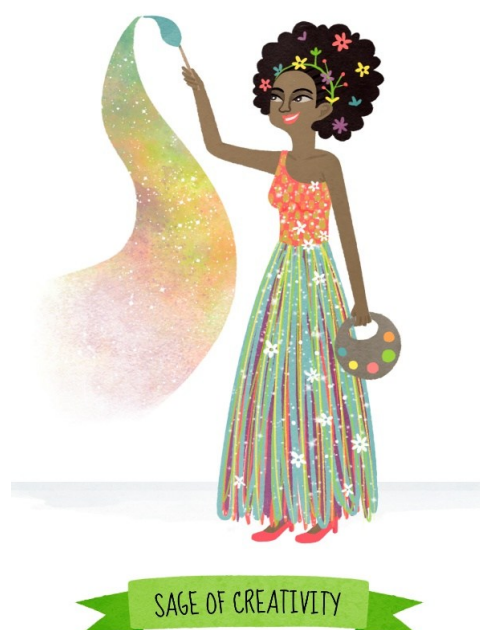
Eating Disorders can create a false sense of identity that becomes enmeshed with the illness—“I am anorexic,” rather than “I am a person experiencing anorexia.” The Sages help shift this narrative by offering language and imagery that affirm the adolescent’s deeper self—someone with emotions, values, and dreams that exist beyond the eating disorder’s grip.

- 2. Foster self-compassion and perspective-taking**

The Sages model kinder, more understanding internal voices that counteract harsh self-judgment. This shift not only softens the internal dialogue but helps adolescents develop a wider lens through which they view themselves and their experiences. Compassion becomes a tool for healing, and perspective-taking becomes a skill that helps them navigate relationships and recovery.

- 3. Encourage values-based coping and inner strength**

Instead of relying on control, withdrawal, or avoidance, or numbing (common coping mechanisms in anorexia), the Sages offer pathways that are guided by the adolescent’s own values and strengths. Whether it’s turning to the Sage of Curiosity when facing uncertainty, or the Sage of



Trust when managing anxiety, each card encourages action that is congruent with who they are—supporting more sustainable, life-affirming ways of coping.

4. **Shift the therapeutic focus from “what’s wrong” to “what’s possible”**

Treatment can often focus heavily on symptom reduction and problem-solving. While necessary, this can leave the adolescent feeling pathologized or stuck in a deficit-based identity. The Sage Cards help reframe the therapeutic space to one of growth, discovery, and possibility. They invite the adolescent (and the clinician) to look forward—not just at what needs to be “fixed,” but at what strengths can be reclaimed, what values can be lived by, and what kind of future is waiting to unfold.

How to Introduce the Sage Cards in Session

1. Lay the Sage Cards on the Table while you introduce what you will be doing together: I generally use the following script which ties the work we have done with the Trait and Inner critic cards to what we will be doing now with the Sage Cards.



Sample script when introducing the Sage Cards

*"We've spent some time exploring your **Head Space**—that part of you that thinks deeply, tries to figure things out, and sometimes holds onto those strong inner critics or traits like control and perfectionism. You've done such a brave and thoughtful job noticing how those voices show up. And now, I'd like us to shift gently toward something just as important—your **Heart Space**.*

Your Heart Space is where your inner knowing lives. It's quieter, softer, and maybe less familiar—especially if the eating disorder has taken up a lot of room. But this is also where your wise guides reside. These are the parts of you that know what really matters to you deep down. They

know how to care, how to connect, and how to guide you toward what brings you strength, meaning, and peace.

*These **Sage Cards** represent those guides. Each one speaks to a different inner strength—like compassion, curiosity, courage, or creativity. I'd like you to take some time to simply sit with the cards in front of you. There's absolutely no pressure. Let yourself feel into them, rather than think about them too much. Maybe you notice one that you feel gently drawn to... even if you're not sure why. That's okay. Sometimes it starts with just a tiny spark—like a memory, a feeling, or a quiet sense of recognition.*

Maybe one of the cards reminds you of something that mattered to you before the eating disorder. Maybe it connects you to a part of yourself you miss, or something you'd like to feel again. Trust



whatever small voice or feeling shows up. You might feel a pull toward more than one—that's completely fine. And if nothing jumps out straight away, we can go through them together and you can simply notice what comes up as we talk.

There's no right or wrong here. What matters most is that you're open to listening—to you. This might feel unfamiliar or even difficult at first, especially if your heart space has been quiet for a while. But I truly believe that as you keep listening and giving yourself time, you'll start to reconnect with the parts of you that have been waiting—patiently—to be heard."

That's just an example but it's best to use your own style. You also know your adolescent better than anyone else so adapt the script to your clients' needs or style of learning or level of understanding.

2. Make sure you go slowly and at your client's pace as they may feel vulnerable and the heart space may feel a little threatening for the reasons we have previously spoken about.
3. The Goal is to get the adolescent to reflect on what they feel in the moment, what they experience when looking at the cards, to listen to any whispers and to focus on the emotions felt in their body. This could be a totally new experience or raise past experiences of memories.
4. Another important goal is to pair a sage with a trait or inner critic card and start a dialogue.
5. There are also many prompts provided in the instruction manual that accompanies this course.

Creative Expression and Integration

Therapist goal is to Encourage the adolescent to bring the Sage to life through a range of creative and reflective practices that support emotional integration and self-awareness:

- Draw, journal, or role-play as the Sage to explore its voice, qualities and presence.
- Write a letter from the Sage — either to themselves or to their eating disorder as a form of internal dialogue and healing.
- Facilitate a dialogue between a Sage and a Critic card, helping the adolescent experience both voices and their contrasting intentions.
- Collaborate to create a short, guided meditation in which the adolescent can regularly connect with their Sage. Encourage them to note any emotional, behavioural, or cognitive shifts over time.
- Invite the adolescent to photograph the chosen Sage card — one they feel connected to or aspire to strengthen. In moments of distress or overwhelm, they can revisit the image and recite a pre-scripted affirmation that the Sage might offer in those circumstances.
- For experienced clinicians working with older adolescents or adults, consider using chair work to enact a live dialogue between the Sage and the Critic. This can deepen embodiment and insight.

Clinical Insights

- Reassure the adolescent that Sages don't need to feel strong to exist — even a quiet longing for compassion or calm can be a Sage.
- Encourage **curious, nuanced conversations**, such as:
"What makes it hard to hear your Sage voice right now?"



- Reflect on how these inner voices — both Critics and Sages — influence daily decisions, emotional responses, body image, and eating behaviours.

The Emotion Cards

The pack Includes six foundational Emotion Cards—**Joy, Anger, Sadness, Disgust, Surprise, and Fear**—which are universally recognised as core human emotions. When developing the Eating Disorder Therapy Cards, we felt it was essential to include emotion cards for several important reasons:

Therapeutic Use

1. Support Emotional Awareness and Regulation

A substantial body of research highlights the difficulties many individuals with eating disorders experience in recognising, tolerating, and expressing emotions. These challenges often lead to the use of food-related behaviours as a means of regulating, suppressing, or avoiding emotional distress. The Emotion Cards provide a gentle entry point into emotional literacy—supporting adolescents to name, explore, and connect with their emotional experiences rather than avoid them.



2. Address a Core Developmental Task in Adolescence

Learning to understand and manage emotions is a major developmental milestone during adolescence. For young people navigating identity formation while struggling with an eating disorder, this process can be disrupted or delayed. The Emotion Cards serve as an essential adjunct to the Trait, Critic, and Sage cards, laying the groundwork for emotional integration and resilience.

3. Promote Mind-Body Integration

Eating disorders often create a split between the body and emotions, where internal states are dismissed, ignored, or feared. These cards help bridge that divide by encouraging adolescents to become more attuned to their inner emotional world—fostering a more compassionate and embodied relationship with themselves.

4. Facilitate Therapeutic Conversation

The visual and accessible nature of the Emotion Cards opens space for meaningful therapeutic dialogue. They help adolescents externalise their feelings, reduce emotional overwhelm, and develop the vocabulary needed to communicate their internal states with others—especially important for those who may find verbal emotional expression difficult.

5. Build Emotional Connection and Safety

Recognising and validating emotions in therapy enhances psychological safety. When adolescents feel seen and understood emotionally, they are more likely to engage in treatment and begin trusting others. The cards promote emotional validation and help young people experience their feelings not as threats, but as valuable signals.



6. Encourage Emotional Nuance

While the cards reflect the six core emotions, they also offer opportunities to explore the spectrum of feelings beneath each one—for example, how sadness might manifest as loneliness, grief, or disappointment. This supports deeper emotional insight and helps the adolescent distinguish between different shades of experience, which is often difficult in the rigidity of an eating disorder mindset.



Ultimately, the Emotion Cards are not just about naming feelings—they are about helping adolescents **reclaim their emotional world as something meaningful, manageable, and deeply human**. We aim to support the young person in making vital connections between emotion and function: how they **feel when they act, respond, or relate to others**, and how those feelings shape their inner and outer experiences. When used in conjunction with the Trait, Critic, and Sage Cards, the Emotion Cards foster a more **integrated and compassionate sense of self** and nurture the **emotional insight and resilience essential to recovery**.

Example In Practice: The Avoider Card

Let's Look at the Avoider Cards. We have specifically included two cards in the pack for different circumstances. One is the trait "Harm Avoidance" card that makes you overanalyse situations and makes you unable to tolerate uncertainty. The other is inner critic "The Avoider" card that convinces you that you are totally ill-equipped to deal with most situations and people. This card is mostly used for social connections.

The goal when using the card is to help adolescents explore their internal experience when they find it difficult to face certain situations.

Some questions you can ask are:

"Which of these emotions shows up when you feel the urge to avoid?"

"Where do you notice it in your body?"

"What does that feeling lead you to do, and how does it affect your relationships?"

It's best to design questions to your specific client.

Example In Practice: The Over-Controller Card

The same principle applies to the Over-Controller Card and example questions

"When your Over-Controller part shows up, what emotions is it trying to protect you from?"

"What do you feel in your body when you're trying to stay in control at all costs?"

"What do you fear might happen if you let go, even just a little?"



And just to reiterate as with all components of these cards, it is important that clinicians use their clinical judgment to determine **when and how** to introduce the Emotion Cards based on the adolescent's developmental stage, cognitive capacity, and emotional readiness.

SECTION 4 - Using the Cards in Different Settings

Using the cards in a family setting

There is compelling evidence that many personality traits commonly seen in eating disorders—such as anxiety, perfectionism, rigidity, and overcontrol—often have a familial component. These traits may be inherited, modelled, or absorbed through subtle, repeated interactions within the family system. Many adolescents in therapy have shared their struggles with living up to rigid household expectations, navigating a highly anxious parent's worldview, or feeling stifled by overcontrol. The cards create a non-threatening, non-blaming way to begin unpacking these patterns with compassion and insight.

Adolescents receiving treatment for an eating disorder are not just battling symptoms—they are simultaneously navigating the core developmental tasks of adolescence: discovering who they are, forming values, experimenting with independence, and developing a sense of identity. These are essential milestones on the path to becoming an autonomous adult. However, when the family environment is emotionally intense, overly rigid, or control-oriented, it can inadvertently disrupt or constrain this process. The **Trait, Critic, and Sage Cards** offer a powerful entry point to open conversations around how these dynamics may be influencing the adolescent's inner world and recovery journey. More importantly, they invite the family to reflect on how they can actively support their young person through this pivotal and often tumultuous phase of life.

Therapeutic Benefits of Using the Cards with Families

- **Normalises Shared Traits:** Helps families understand that traits such as anxiety or perfectionism often run through the family system and are not signs of personal failure.
- **Reduces Blame and Guilt:** Encourages insight and curiosity instead of judgment—enabling discussions that are emotionally safe and constructive.
- **Educates parents on Individuation and Identity Formation:** Creates space for the adolescent's voice, highlighting how traits such as overcontrol or perfectionism may clash with their developmental need for autonomy and authenticity.
- **Strengthens Empathy and Perspective-Taking:** Allows family members to gain a deeper understanding of how others experience them—and how their traits impact the family as a whole.
- **Invites Reframing and Reconnection:** Offers a chance to see traits not as flaws but as protectors or learned strategies, which can be softened, supported, or balanced through self-awareness and relational repair.
- **Fosters Collaboration:** Encourages families to co-create new ways of supporting each other—grounded in respect, flexibility, and growth.



- **Enhances Emotional Literacy:** Provides language and visual anchors to explore traits and emotional dynamics that might otherwise feel too complex or sensitive to name.

Suggested process with Families:

1. **Introduce the Cards Gently:** Explain that the goal is to explore shared human experiences, not to label or blame.
2. **Invite Participation:** Ask each family member to choose a card that reflects themselves—or, if consented to, one that reflects how they experience another family member.
3. **Guide Reflective Dialogue** using prompts such as:
 - “How has this trait shaped the way we interact as a family?”
 - “Are there times when this trait helps us? When does it become difficult?”
 - “Who tends to carry this trait most strongly? What might have influenced that?”
 - “How might this trait be affecting the adolescent’s recovery or sense of self?”
4. **Link to Recovery and Growth:** Use Sage Cards to explore how different parts of the self (e.g., compassion, courage, curiosity) might respond to these patterns in more balanced ways.

Using the cards with families offers a powerful opportunity for healing. It helps families move from reactivity to reflection—from judgment to understanding. It allows adolescents to feel seen and heard in their developmental journey while helping parents become more attuned, flexible, and supportive.

In this shared space of exploration, new conversations emerge. Conversations where blame gives way to empathy, rigidity softens into curiosity, and every member—adolescent and adult alike—can begin to grow.

Using the cards In a Group Setting

I don’t intend to go into great depth for this slide as it is a whole subject in itself. Needless to say, the therapy cards are also highly adaptable for use in group therapy settings, especially among adolescents who benefit from peer connection and normalisation.

Group Applications May Include:

- Exploring how each group member experiences their traits, critics, and emotions
- Discussing the impact of critics and traits on behaviour, relationships, and self-image
- Sharing how these inner experiences affect eating disorder symptoms and recovery challenges
- Identifying commonalities that help group members realise they are not alone
- Brainstorming and practicing ways to access inner Sages and develop new coping tools

This kind of shared exploration allows the group to reframe traits as potential strengths, support one another in reducing self-criticism, and co-create new strategies for resilience and flexibility.



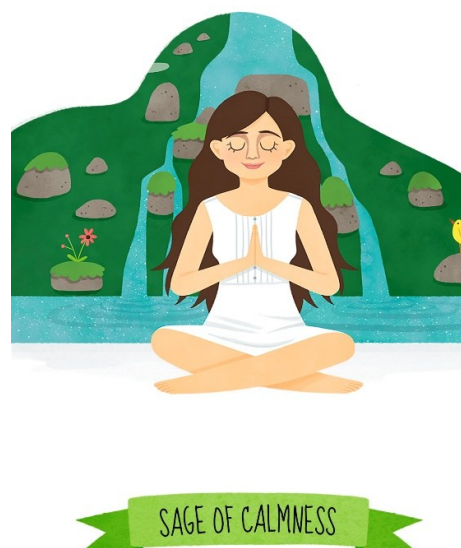
SECTION 5 – Course Conclusion

We've now come to the end of the course, and I want to sincerely thank you for your participation and commitment to deepening your practice. I'd like to leave you with a heartfelt reminder about the **power and responsibility** that comes with using these cards.

When used thoughtfully and in the right context, the **Eating Disorder Therapy Cards** can be a transformative tool in supporting young people to explore their inner world and strengthen their recovery journey. However, it is essential that they are used with **clinical sensitivity, sound judgment**, and always within the broader framework of comprehensive care.

Closing Reflection

I'd like to leave you with this final reflection—a reminder of how much more effective and compassionate our work becomes when we include the young person's experience at the centre of care:



“When we understand the role anorexia plays in a young person’s life, we stop battling symptoms and start treating the person.”

Clinical considerations

Please keep in mind:

- Anorexia Nervosa is a life-threatening illness. Treatment should always involve a multidisciplinary team, particularly a paediatrician or GP, to ensure ongoing medical safety and monitoring. These cards are not appropriate for use with medically unstable clients.
- A thorough assessment of the adolescent's mental state must be undertaken prior to introducing the cards.
- Please exercise clinical discretion, especially when working with:
 - Younger children (under 13), who may not fully grasp the symbolic concepts or may feel overwhelmed.



- Neurodivergent adolescents, who may experience or interpret the material differently and require tailored approaches.

Disclaimer

Every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy and integrity of the information presented in this course. However, no responsibility can be accepted for the misapplication or misinterpretation of this material. If you are unsure about how to proceed in a clinical situation, please seek supervision or further guidance.

Thank you once again for your thoughtful engagement throughout this course. Your commitment to supporting young people in their recovery journey is deeply appreciated. I hope these cards become a powerful and compassionate tool in your ongoing therapeutic practice.

Details for Feedback and Support

If you would like further details, ask questions, make comments or suggestions please contact me via my website www.aptttherapeuticsolutions.com

We also offer a **private Facebook group** exclusively for clinicians who have completed this course and wish to **share experiences, reflections, and ideas** related to the use of the Eating Disorder Therapy Cards in practice. The group will be **monitored**, and I'll check in regularly to offer clarification, respond to questions, and support thoughtful discussion around the cards' clinical application. I will endeavour to attend fortnightly for live questions or comments.

Please note: **This group is for educational and professional development purposes only.** It is **not a therapeutic space**, and any client-related discussions must remain general and fully de-identified to uphold confidentiality.

