

Tips for talking to a friend or family member who may be struggling with an Eating Disorder

If you are worried about your friend's eating behaviours or attitudes, it is important to express your concerns in a loving and supportive way.

It is also helpful to discuss your worries early on, rather than waiting until your friend has endured many of the damaging physical and emotional effects of eating disorders.

What should I say?

Set a time to talk. Set aside a time for a private, respectful meeting with your friend to discuss your concerns openly and honestly in a caring, supportive way. Make sure you will be some place away from distractions.

Communicate your concerns. Share your memories of specific times when you felt concerned about your friend's eating or exercise behaviours. Explain that you think these things may indicate that there could be a problem that needs professional attention.

Ask your friend to seek professional help. Encourage them to explore these concerns with a doctor, counsellor, or other health professional who is knowledgeable about eating disorders. If you feel comfortable doing so, offer to help your friend make an appointment or accompany them on their first visit.

Avoid conflicts or a battle of wills. If your friend refuses to acknowledge that there is a problem or any reason for you to be concerned, restate your feelings and the reasons for them and leave yourself open and available as a supportive listener for when they are ready.

Avoid placing shame, blame, or guilt on your friend regarding their actions or attitudes. Do not use accusatory "you" statements such as, "You just need to eat." Or, "You are acting irresponsibly." Instead, use "I" statements. For example: "I'm concerned about you because you refuse to eat breakfast or lunch." Or, "It makes me afraid to hear you vomiting."

Understand that the person you are worried about may not see their eating as a problem. They may actually view it as a solution to coping with difficult feelings or experiences (such as loss, powerlessness, guilt).

Try not to make assumptions. There are many things that can trigger the onset of an eating disorder. If you interpret someone's eating problems in a particular way- without really listening to the person themselves – it could add to their feeling of being out of control. It could make them less likely to share their feelings.

Avoid giving simple solutions. For example, "If you'd just stop, then everything would be fine!"

Express your continued support. Remind your friend that you care and want your friend to be healthy and happy.

Compliment their strengths. Give compliments that have nothing to do with appearance, eating or food.

Help them find good information. This could include looking for online support while helping the person avoid websites or forums that could promote unsafe eating and exercise habits.

If the person you are worried about is a member of your family, you may want to consider family therapy. This means working through issues as a family with the support of a therapist. This may help you work out how to communicate with and support someone in your family who has an eating problem.