

WHAT TO DO WHEN SOMEONE YOU KNOW HAS AN EATING DISORDER?



Who Should do the Talking

Friends and Roommates - If you have a friend or a roommate that you think has an eating disorder (“ED friend”), it’s best if you talk to her or him first before going to professionals or to her or his family. The best person to intervene initially is someone who has a close relationship with the person with the eating disorder. If there are several people who are worried about the person who has the eating disorder, pick the one who has the best relationship with them.

Before you talk to the ED friend, identify what your specific concerns are. What behaviors have you seen that concern you? Write them down for yourself ahead of time. Identify behaviors or signs you have seen. Also, think about the impact of these behaviors on your relationship with the ED friend. Write down thoughts and feelings you have as a result of the behaviors that are affecting your relationship with them.

If you feel constantly frustrated, depressed, resentful, or angry about your ED friend’s behavior or difficulties, get help for yourself. This may also be helpful to your friend by setting an example. It will not be helpful for you to talk to your ED friend when you are having strong negative feelings.

When to Talk

Pick a time when you will not be interrupted. Talking before class, meetings or dates will increase your pressure, decreasing your ability to communicate.

Choose a time when you can be calm. Please do not bring this up when you are angry, hurt or upset (see above). You need to stay focused on your concerns about your relationship with this person and why you think she or he needs help. Getting angry, confrontations, pleas and threats will shut down communication and she or he will end up being defensive about their food behavior.

What to Say

Using the thoughts you wrote down ahead of time, address the following things in your initial discussion. By becoming familiar with what you want to say will decrease your anxiety.

- ♥Be specific about the person’s behaviors about eating, purging, exercising, starving etc.
- ♥Be as direct as possible “I heard you vomiting after dinner.” “I’ve noticed you’ve lost weight.” If you are indirect, you are conveying the message that you don’t want to talk about it. Your openness allows the ED friend to be open.
- ♥Use “I” Statements. Keep to “I” statements that reflect your concerns, “I’ve been worried about you, you are so distant.” (But not, “I think you are anorexic.”)
- ♥Changes in Relationship. If there are any changes that have occurred that have affected your relationship with that person, bring them up. Focus on being supportive and willing to listen. Often the person will try to sidetrack the issue, bringing up other issues. Tell that ED friend that you will take the time to discuss those issues at a later date. But for now, you need to discuss issues related to the eating disorder.

What Not to Say

- ♣Don’t make critical comments about your friend’s food, weight, or exercise habits. If it concerns you, explain in a caring way as described above.
- ♣In general, you can do your part by not being critical about other people’s bodies. It is easy to talk with friends and let comments slip out. Remember that these comments can hurt and devastate others.
- ♣We also recommend that you avoid giving positive weight-related comments to people. You never know what behavior you might be reinforcing when you tell someone that they look great since they dropped weight or increased their muscle “definition.”
- ♣Don’t become over-involved. Don’t coax, bribe, or yell at your friend to change their eating habits. Let them know that you are concerned about them. Once you’ve let them know, let them take charge of their problem.

Reasonable Expectations

A successful discussion is one that involves clear and honest statements of your feelings in this relationship. It is not a failure if they don't accept your help or denies there is a problem.

A failed discussion is a "stuff and dump." You've held your feelings in for so long that your anger takes over and you never get to say what you really wanted to say.

Do not expect the person to stop bingeing, starving or purging. Bringing the problem out in the open is only the first step toward recovery. Your job is to support and encourage her or him to talk about their eating disorder. If the discussion is getting out of control, if you start getting angry or upset, then stop the discussion. You can continue at another time.

If you are worried that there is an emergency, and that you need a professional to assess the situation, tell the person you are going to call a professional for advice.

Their Response

Relief - Many people express relief that their problem is out in the open and they can now talk about it.

Admission - Some will admit that they have a problem and appreciate your support.

Denial - The person may deny there is a problem. She or he may attack you, get angry, and tell you to mind your own business. They may tell you that you're wrong and there is no problem, or will try to minimize it. Stand your ground and refer back to your own observations. Be willing to admit it is a possibility you could be wrong - but stick to your observations. Remember eating disorders can occur at all levels and intensities.

Getting Help

If you are unsure of what to say, talk to your RA, house mother, or contact UA Counseling and Psych Services for help with this issue. Drop in for a triage appointment M-F, 9:00-4:00 or call at 621-3334 and ask to speak with Jan Courtney, LPC.

When They Refuse Help

Eating disorders require intensive professional treatment and substantial time and energy on the part of the ED person and their family and friends. Whereas the person may refuse help, you have established that you see a problem. It may take the fifteenth time someone says that person has a problem before they can seek help.

If you are concerned that the person is experiencing medically-threatening problems from starvation, anorexia, ipecac syrup, laxative, or medication abuse - please contact professional help at once.

For more information check out *Surviving an Eating Disorder: Strategies for Family and Friends* by Siegel, Brisman and Weinshel, Harper Perennial, and *The Eating Disorder Sourcebook* by Carolyn Costin, Lowell House. The following websites may also be helpful:

- www.nationaleatingdisorders.org
- www.edreferral.com
- www.something-fishy.org