

How to Help a Friend with an Eating Disorder

What Can I Do?

If you and others have observed behaviors in a friend or roommate that are suggestive of an eating disorder, you are in a position to help.

- ❖ Make a plan to approach the person in a private place when there is no immediate stress and there is time to talk.
- ❖ Present in a caring but straightforward way what you have observed and what your concerns are. Tell her or him that you are worried and want to help. (Friends who are too angry with the person to talk supportively should not be part of the discussion.)
- ❖ Give the person time to talk and encourage them to verbalize feelings. Ask clarifying questions. Listen carefully; accept what is said in a non-judgmental manner.
- ❖ Do not argue about whether there is or is not a problem---power struggles are not helpful. Perhaps you can say, "I hear what you are saying and I hope you are right that this is not a problem. But I am still very worried about what I have seen and heard, and that is not going to go away."
- ❖ Provide information about resources for treatment. Offer to go with the person and wait while they have their first appointment with a counselor, physician, or nutritionist. Ask them to consider going for one appointment before they make a decision about ongoing treatment.
- ❖ If you are concerned that the eating disorder is severe or life-threatening, enlist the help of a counseling staff person, a relative, friend or roommate of the person before you intervene. Present a united and supportive front with others.
- ❖ If the person denies the problem, becomes angry, or refuses treatment, understand that this is often part of the eating disorder. Besides, they have a right to refuse treatment (unless their life is in danger). You may feel helpless, angry, and frustrated with them. You might say, "I know you can refuse to go for help, but that will not stop me from worrying about you or caring about you. I may bring this up again to you later, and maybe we can talk more about it then." Follow through on that---and on any other promise you make.
- ❖ Do not try to be a hero or a rescuer; you will probably be resented. If you do the best you can to help on several occasions and the person does not accept it, stop. Remind yourself you have done all that is reasonable to do. Eating disorders are stubborn problems, and treatment is most effective when the person is truly ready for it. You may have planted a seed that helps them get ready.
- ❖ Eating disorders are usually not emergency situations. But if the person is suicidal or otherwise in serious danger, **GET PROFESSIONAL HELP IMMEDIATELY.**

Do's and Don'ts for Helping a Friend with an Eating Disorder

DO:

- Listen with understanding.
- Appreciate the openness and trust in sharing with you his/her distress.
- Share your own struggles, be open and real.
- Learn more about eating disorders.
- Support and be available.
- Give hope that with help and with patience she/he can be free from this disorder.
- Give your friend a list of resources for help if you can.

DON'T

- Tell your friend that he/she is crazy.
- Blame him/her.
- Gossip about your friend.
- Follow him/her around to check eating or purging behavior.
- Ignore your friend.
- Reject her/him.
- Tell him/her to quit this ridiculous behavior.
- Feel compelled to solve their problem.
- Make excess comments about being thin.

If you believe your friend does have an eating disorder, what should you do?

First of all, consult a professional. A good resource on campus is the Student Psychological Counseling Services. Feel free to contact them at (714) 997-6778 or spcs@chapman.edu.