
A GUIDE FOR WHEN A FRIEND HAS AN EATING DISORDER

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National Eating Disorder Information Centre

www.nedic.ca

UNDERSTANDING FOOD AND WEIGHT PREOCCUPATION IN FRIENDS

It is often difficult for friends to understand why someone they care about is struggling with food and weight preoccupation.

There is no singular cause of an eating disorder. The development of an eating disorder cannot be attributed to a specific person, event, or gene. Eating disorders are complex illnesses that are best understood as the outcome of the interaction of multiple biological, psychological, and sociocultural factors. Risk factors include genetic vulnerability/family history, body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, perfectionism, predisposition to experiencing negative emotions, dieting, and facing stigmatization based on one's weight.

Eating disorders can seriously affect physical and psychological health and functioning. Their impacts can show up at school, at work, and in relationships. The eating disorder behaviours may serve a purpose in your friend's life, however, and they may not see the harmful consequences the way that you do. In fact, they may not even recognize that they are ill. Your friend may be unable to recognize their eating disorder if they are unaware of the signs and symptoms that are characteristic of an eating disorder. Also, their self-perception and ability to think clearly may be skewed if they are malnourished.

As a friend, you may be able to bring to their attention the negative ways in which the eating disorder is affecting their life. However, bear in mind that they may not be able to make changes immediately. Though this may be frustrating to you, it is important to realize that only the person living with the disorder can make the decision to get help, and choose the kind of help they are ready to accept.

If your friend is a child or teen, it is critical that their parents/guardians know about their difficulties too. If their parents/guardians are not already aware of the situation, talk to your friend and support them in deciding on the best way to tell these family members. If you are also a child or teen, it is important that you do not try to help your friend all by yourself. The stakes are too high. A responsible adult needs to know.

You also need to balance your concerns for your friend with your own well-being. Your friendship can be a meaningful source of support for your friend during this difficult time; however, it is important to recognize your own limits and ensure that you don't take on more than you can realistically handle.

WHAT CAN I DO BEFORE APPROACHING MY FRIEND?

- Become informed. Seek credible information about eating disorders – the more you know, the more supportive you can be. Visiting www.nedic.ca would be a great place to start. Read about what eating disorders are and the signs and symptoms that an affected person might exhibit. Read about how eating disorder behaviours can impact physical and psychological health and functioning. Find out where your friend can go for help and support.
- Set limits for yourself in terms of how much you can, and are willing to help. Offer to do only what you feel capable of sustaining over the long term. Protect your friendship.
- Understand that your friend might not welcome your concern when you first approach them, and may even react with anger or denial. Shame, fear, and ambivalence about the eating disorder and about recovery are common. Remember that they may not even be aware that they have an eating disorder. Try again at a later date, keeping in mind that it may take time before your friend is ready to discuss the issue and that they may want to talk about it with someone else.
- Be prepared. There is a possibility that a discussion about your friend's eating difficulties won't lead to changes in attitude or behaviour on their part. Your friend may not be ready – or able – to let go of the eating disorder. This doesn't mean you have to give up trying to help, but it does mean that your approach may have to change. Recovery involves many steps and begins with the affected person recognizing that they have a problem and deciding to do something about it. It will be a big move for your friend to take even a small step toward better health.

HOW CAN I APPROACH MY FRIEND?

- Find an appropriate time and place to speak to your friend, e.g., somewhere that is private and comfortable, and not during a meal.
- Let your friend know that you are concerned and willing to help – but keep your limits in mind.
- Initially, it may be helpful to express your concern in a general manner to give your friend the opportunity to open up to you on their own terms, e.g., “I'm worried about you. You don't seem yourself. Are you having difficulties?”
- If your friend denies that there is anything wrong, be more specific, e.g., “The reason I'm asking is that I've noticed changes in your eating/food-related behaviours that are concerning me.” Describe what you have noticed.
- Encourage and support any efforts your friend makes to get help and make positive health-related changes. Don't coerce or force them into getting help. Your friend will be more likely to open up to you and consider options for help if they know that you are concerned, but are not going to try to force them into anything before they're ready.

HOW CAN I SUPPORT MY FRIEND?

- Avoid commenting on weight or appearance – theirs or others'. Your friend is already overly focused on their body and how it compares to others'. Such remarks, even if intended to be complimentary, will validate unhelpful beliefs they may have about physical appearance being a reflection of a person's worth.
- Examine your own attitudes about food, weight, size, and shape. What biases might you have and how might you be conveying them to others? How do these impact your own well-being?
- Find motivating reasons for your friend to get help and make positive health-related changes.
- Be encouraging. Foster their confidence in their ability to fully recover.
- Affirm your friend's qualities and abilities that are unrelated to food or physical appearance, e.g., remind them that they are intelligent, funny, competent, and that they are more than their eating disorder. Acknowledge and celebrate any healthy changes in thinking or behaviour.
- Keep the friendship alive. Engage in activities that you and your friend both enjoy, e.g., going to the movies, taking an art class, or exploring a new city/town.
- Be patient. Overcoming an eating problem takes time and is not a linear process.
- Don't force or tempt your friend to eat. Do offer to eat with your friend at meal or snack times to provide support for normal eating.

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You are not alone. For more information, support and resources, contact NEDIC.

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