

How to Help a Friend With an Eating Disorder

If you and others have observed behaviors in your 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 time to talk.
- Present in a caring but straightforward way what you have observed and what your concerns are. Tell him or her that you are worried and want to help. (Friends who are too angry with the person to talk supportively should not be a part of this 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 doctor, therapist, counseling center, 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 illness. 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 it 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.
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