

# Eating Disorders and My Friend Who Has Difficulty with Food

*The information in this article is by no means intended as a substitute for medical advice from a qualified health practitioner. It does not recommend any one treatment, therapy or medication. Please seek medical advice as different medications suit different individuals.*

## A Guide for Young People Who Have Friends with Eating and Body Image Problems

It can be quite frightening when a friend begins to display some of the signs of disordered eating. Disordered eating includes skipping meals and losing weight; thinking s/he is fat when they are not; becoming withdrawn; vomiting after eating; and appearing depressed, irritable or moody.

What do you do? Do you ignore it, discuss it with them or talk to a teacher or adult?

It is important that your friend is encouraged to seek help, after all, the sooner a person decides to get stuck into fighting an eating disorder the better. Here are some guidelines that might help you to know how to encourage your friend to seek help and how you can support them while they fight their eating disorder.

### What should be the first thing I do?

Approach a Student Counsellor, Guidance Officer, Youth Worker, teacher or an adult you feel comfortable with. Talk about how you feel about what is happening with your friend. Your attitudes will affect the way you relate to your friend and seeing a friend in distress can make you feel unsure about yourself. It can therefore be useful to talk with an adult about what you think about "thinness", "fat", dieting, and your own body.

### Simple Research

Gain some understanding about eating problems from organisations like the EDFV or from an adult that you trust. Eating disorders are not just about food. They are about deeper problems that the young person finds too difficult or painful to address directly. This can make them feel like they are out of control, and food becomes the way that they attempt to regain control. Other young people have different ways of handling their feelings. Some use drugs, some become depressed, some use sex and some alcohol etc.

## Does your friend need help?

Your friend does need professional help. However remember you are not responsible for him/her getting help. A student counsellor, guidance office, youth worker, teacher or other adult that you trust will be able to help you to decide the support you need and how to best assist your friend.

## Some tips to help you talk to your friend

It is important to be as open as possible with your friend. Tell them that because you are concerned about them, you are going to speak to, or have spoken to someone so that they can get support.

Sometimes when a friend has told us about an eating problem, they have sworn us to secrecy. If you are really worried about your friend, and you know that they need help, you may want to tell someone else. At the same time you might be scared that your friend will be angry with you for telling their secret. In most cases, you will have a gut feeling about the right thing to do. If someone is really in trouble, you should talk to someone else about getting him or her some help. Your friend may be angry with you at first but they will eventually understand why you had to tell.

Remember s/he is still the same person, but their thoughts about his/her weight, food and body have become distorted. If you and other friends can be understanding and relate to him/her as normally as possible it helps them to stay in touch with the person they really are, and this may help them to want to get well.

However it is not your responsibility to fix their problem. Believe in them and that they can, and will address what is happening for them. But remember only s/he can decide that for herself.

## Is there anything I should avoid talking about?

Try to avoid commenting on what someone is or isn't eating. When you go out places and know there is food there, don't be embarrassed to ask your friend to come with you or to ask if s/he wants a drink or something to eat. They may say "no" but still ask them. Be normal. If you have lollies, chips or chocolate ask them if they want one, just as you would ask another friend.

Also try to avoid commenting on his/her appearance. No matter what you say it could be misinterpreted. S/he already worries about their weight all the time.

## What happens to someone when they have an eating disorder?

Remember that your friend is unwell and they will be different for a while.

Sometimes young people become so sick that they have to go to hospital. This can be very distressing for friends and family, so if you choose to visit them in hospital, try to prepare yourself and make sure that you have support. If they can have visitors you may decide to visit them, or otherwise you could send a card letting them know that you are thinking of them.

Try to remind your friend of all the positive things about recovery, and how much s/he deserves to feel better about herself.

## What About Me?

There may be times when you feel unable to relate normally to her/him. This is okay. We all need 'time-out' sometimes from life's stresses. Decide what help you need and take time to relax and take care of yourself.

Being a friend of someone with an eating disorder can be really tough, let other people know if you're having trouble dealing with it.

Sometimes people who have an eating disorder change and may stop calling you or not want to spend time with you. This can be really upsetting. You might understand that they are unwell, but you might also be really angry about the way that they are treating you.

It is normal to be angry and upset if you think you are losing a friend. In most cases, although you might feel like you have done something wrong, your friend is not rejecting you. It is just that they are going through a really hard time and they may find talking about it too difficult, even to you.

Sometimes it is really hard, but be patient and hang in there; your friend will get better and your friendship will have another chance.

It is also okay sometimes to let them know that you are aware that they are having a hard time and to remind them that you are their friend. Try not to push them if they don't want to talk. It is important to do this with the support of an understanding adult

Remember it is important that you take care of *yourself* and take time to relax and do things that you enjoy.

## Remind Yourself and Your Friend That...

Recovery is possible for everyone. The chances of recovery are increased significantly if suitable professional help is received as early as possible. The process is often long and slow and it can be a very challenging time for both sufferers and those who care for them. With hindsight, those who have come through it often consider their recovery to have been a positive and rewarding experience.

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