



# How to Help Someone Who May Have an Eating Disorder

## What to take into consideration beforehand:

1. Think about who may be the best person to do the talking.
2. Pick a time to meet when you are feeling calm.
3. Pick a time and place where you won't have interruptions, and where you will both be comfortable.
4. Carefully consider what you will want to say. Consult with a knowledgeable person for support and assistance (for example, RHD, advisor, therapist, nutritionist, or health educator). Practice what to say—a well-planned discussion will have a better impact and increase the likelihood that the person will respond positively.
5. Give some thought to the following points in order to be clear about what to say:
  - What is worrying you about your friend?
  - How do you feel about his/her behavior?
  - What are your goals in talking to the person?
6. Keep in mind that you can stop the conversation if it starts to get out of control, and continue later.

## Some guidelines for communication:

1. Express your concern in a caring, non-judgmental way by sharing your feelings. Use “I” statements, such as: *“I am worried about you because you seem unhappy.” “I am concerned about you—you seem to worry so much about food and weight.” “It seems like you’re having a hard time—is there any way I can help?”*
2. Don’t diagnose or label. It’s better to say, *“I think you may have a problem,”* not, *“You have an eating disorder.”*
3. Invite the person to share his or her feelings with you. *“Would you like to talk about it?” “I usually feel better after I talk something out with a friend. If you want to talk, I would be glad to listen.”*
4. Be supportive and show the person you believe in him or her. Let your friend know that the conversation is confidential.
5. It may help to be specific about behaviors that concern you, without condemning the person or getting into an argument. *“I’ve noticed that you talk a lot about your weight and feel fat no matter how thin you get.” “I’ve heard you crying/being sick.”* Judgmental statements such as the following are not helpful: *“How could you do this to yourself?” “It’s disgusting! Why do you vomit/starve yourself?”*
6. If your friend declines to talk about it, don’t push. But do check back later. *“I could be wrong, but I just want you to know that I do care and am interested.” “If you ever want to talk I’m available.”* After that, continue to treat the person in a normal, friendly way. Later on, ask again: *“How are you doing?” “I wonder if you’ve thought any more about what we were discussing last week?” “You know, even though you said everything’s okay, I still keep thinking that something is troubling you.”*
7. Unless the situation seems urgent, give the person a little time. But, if nothing happens and you are still concerned, talk again to a professional about what to do next.
8. If your friend does confide in you, let him/her know that you’re glad. *“I’m so glad you told me. Let’s talk again and be in touch.” “I’d like to help in however I can.”*
9. Don’t be a watchdog. Watching your friend eat or telling your friend what to do is not helpful. It’s best to ask how he/she would like you to help. Note that if your friend asks a question like, *“Do I look fat?”* a response such as, *“No, you look great,”* may only increase the problem. Instead say, *“I care about how you feel, and how you feel about yourself.”*
10. Lead up to a referral. *“I’d like to help more, but I’m not sure how—I haven’t had much experience with this.” “You seem to feel better talking. Have you ever thought about talking to someone with experience working with these problems?” “I want to be here as your friend, but I don’t know how to help with this problem. How about talking with someone at Gannett—they have experience with this.”*
11. Offer to help make an appointment at Gannett Health Center with a nutritionist, therapist, or medical provider in the Cornell Healthy Eating Program (255-5155). You may accompany your friend to the appointment, if desired.
12. If your friend objects to seeing a professional, he/she may have a good reason. Invite your friend to talk about it. Listen, then try to explore any objections, such as the following: *“No one else can help, I have to do it myself.” “I once saw a therapist and it was awful.” “I don’t want my parents, friends, advisor to find out.” “I can’t afford the time/money.”*
13. Emphasize that health care is confidential. If a previous experience was bad, sympathize—there is no obligation to continue if the person doesn’t like it. *“I can understand why you are nervous, but trying on your own doesn’t seem to be*

*working. The person you see this time might be different.*” Let your friend know that getting help may be one of the most important things he or she may need to do in order to feel better and move ahead with life.

14. Once you've made a referral, it's helpful to check back with the person to ask: *“How did it go?”* Remind your friend that you care and are there to help, if needed.

## **How to deal with your own frustrations—when the situation doesn't improve:**

1. Realize that you can't make anyone change. The person has to be ready. It's not your responsibility or failure if someone doesn't improve.
2. Understand that behavior adapts slowly. Even if the person is getting help, it may be weeks or months before any change is evident.
3. Talk to someone about your own emotions, if you feel the need.
4. Set appropriate limits. This will also help the person with the eating disorder.
  - a. Limit your involvement to what you genuinely feel okay about.

*“I can't talk now, I'm studying for an exam. Tomorrow afternoon would be fine, though.”*  
*“I can talk but only for about twenty minutes. Then I have to go to the library.”*  
*“Let's talk about something else. How are you doing otherwise?”*—then bring up topics of mutual interest to show that you care about the person and can give attention for other reasons.
  - b. Set limits for behavior that affects yourself and others.

*“I'm sorry you have this problem and I'd like to help. But, we can't tolerate vomit in the bathroom.”*  
*“If you take someone else's food you have to replace it, otherwise it's bad for the other people in the house.”*
4. Consult with a professional for further help.

## **Resources:**

### **GANNETT: CORNELL UNIVERSITY HEALTH SERVICES**

- Cornell Healthy Eating Program (CHEP)—specialized care for nutrition, eating problems and body image concerns. To schedule an appointment, call 255-5155.
- Health Promotion—print and web-based information, inservice training, consultation and referral. Visit Gannett Level 3, or call 255-4782.

### **EARS (Empathy Assistance & Referral Service)**

- Trained volunteers staff a walk-in and telephone peer counseling and referral service: 255-EARS.

### **OFF CAMPUS**

- Nutrition Clinic of Elmira—specialized treatment for eating disorders. Call 607 732-5646.

### **OTHER INFORMATION**

- *Surviving an Eating Disorder: Strategies for Family and Friends* (Siegel, Brisman & Weinschel)—an excellent resource book available from Gannett pharmacy.
- National Eating Disorders Association—information, guidance and referral, phone 800 931-2237; website: [www.eatingdisorders.org](http://www.eatingdisorders.org).

