



## Ways to start a discussion with a loved one who might have an eating disorder



The following guidance presumes that the situation is serious, that it is not immediately life threatening, and that it does not require emergency medical care or a call to 911.

- **Learn all you can about eating disorders.** Then, prepare yourself to listen with compassion and no judgment.
- Have a list handy of the resources to offer if asked. Remember that even though you are informed about the eating disorder, only a professional trained in diagnosing eating disorders can make a diagnosis. Avoid using your knowledge to nag or scare the person. The goal of a discussion should be to express your concerns about what you've observed and persuade, but not force, the person to accept help.
- **Plan a private, uninterrupted time and place to start a discussion.** Be calm, caring, and nonjudgmental. Directly express, in a caring way, your observations and concerns about the person's behavior. Use a formula like "I am concerned about you and what's going on for you when I see you [fill in the blank]." Cite specific days/times, situations, and behaviors that have raised your concern. Share your wonder about whether the behavior might indicate an eating disorder that requires treatment. Share what you've observed about the person's mood, depression, health, addiction recovery, or relationships. Avoid words and body language that could imply blame. Avoid discussing food and eating behavior, which can lead to power struggles. Leave those issues for the therapist to handle. Comments like "You're putting on weight" or "You look thinner," may be perceived as encouraging disordered eating.
- **Explain the reasons for your concerns, without mentioning eating behavior.** The person may deny the situation because of overwhelming feelings, such as shame and guilt. Avoid expressing frustration with the person. Stay calm. Be gently persistent as you go on expressing your concerns. Ask, "Are you willing to consider the possibility that something is wrong?" Be prepared with resources to offer if the person seems to be listening—or leave a list of resources behind for the person to look at on his/her own. Expressing your concerns may be awkward at first, but such efforts can provide the bridge to help the person. Even if the person does not acknowledge a problem during your discussion, you have raised awareness that you are paying attention, are concerned, and want to be a support.
- **Ask if he/she is willing to explore these concerns with a healthcare professional who understands eating disorders.** Remember that only appropriately trained professionals can offer appropriate options and guide treatment. Your job is to express concern and offer support. Ask if he/she will share the feelings that come from the behavior you've observed. Does it provide a sense of control, relief, satisfaction, or pleasure? Let your loved one know there are other ways to feel better that don't take such a physical and emotional toll.
- **Remind your loved one that many people have successfully recovered from an eating disorder.** Offer to help find a treatment center and offer to go along to a therapist or intake appointment. Offer encouragement and support, but, understand that in the long run, recovery is up to the person.
- **Take a break if your loved one continues to deny the problem.** Revisit the subject again soon, but not in a confrontational way. It's frustrating and scary to see someone you love suffering and be unable to do much about it. Remember that control is often a big issue. You cannot successfully control another person's behavior. Many patients and families interviewed about these issues discussed "control" as a key issue they had to come to terms with. If your child is older than 18, treatment cannot be forced or discussed with any health professional without written permission from your child. Even if your child is younger than age 18 years of age, he/she must be willing to acknowledge the problem and want to participate in treatment. In some cases, enlisting the support of others whom the person likes and respects may help—like a teacher, coach, guidance counselor, or other mentor who can share your concerns.
- **Lastly, being a good support means that you also have to take good care of yourself and attend to the stresses you feel from the situation.** This is important not only for your wellbeing, but also to serve as a model of healthy behavior for the person you are trying to support. Don't let your loved one's eating disorder completely rule your life.