

What to Do When Someone You Care About Has an Eating Disorder

1. Have patience. Anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and compulsive eating can take a long time to resolve. Tell the person you will not force them to do anything they do not want to do. Recovery is possible.
2. Support the person. Let them know you are aware of what's happening and that you care. Listen and allow him/her to express their feelings. Be prepared that the individual may initially deny problems and react with hostility.
3. Avoid discussing weight, shape, fatness, and food as it adds to their fears. Focus on feelings, non-food and non-appearance related activities.
4. Keep working on your relationship with the individual. Don't give up. It is very difficult to lose a family member or friend to destructive weight preoccupation activities. Although the person may push you away that is her/his fear and need for control surfacing, not what they usually want.
5. Find out more about eating disorders and where to get your support for yourself. The process of recovery is often frustrating for everyone involved.
6. Don't take on the role of therapist; your friendship is your most valuable asset. Don't nag the person about eating; you can not cure them. They have to take responsibility for changes. It will happen when they are ready.
7. Examine your own attitudes about body shapes, dieting, and looks, for fat prejudices. Comments may unknowingly exacerbate a desire for thinness.
8. Provide information on help. Assist the individual to seek help. If appropriate, accompany her/him to an appointment, or help them to talk to family members or friends.
9. Don't blame people for what is happening. Eating disorders are coping mechanisms for distress. Blame reinforces a sense of failure and distance. Self-esteem, confidence, and feelings of adequacy are usually very low.
10. Don't accept that this problem can be dealt with in isolation. This may mean seeking advice from parents or family members, a school counsellor, or a public health nurse about your concerns. Your efforts may be life-saving.
11. Early intervention increases the likelihood of a faster recovery with fewer relapses.

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