

How to help a friend with an eating problem

- Ask yourself: “How would I want someone to help me?”
- Be supportive of their struggle. Encourage your friend or partner to get help.
- Approach the person with compassion and directness. If you are going to talk to them, don’t pick a meal time to discuss their eating problem. Instead, choose an opportunity when you can talk to them on a one-on-one basis, and when you are not likely to be interrupted. Remember, if a large group confronts the individual, they may become defensive and think you are trying to “gang up” on them.
- Educate yourself about eating disorders so that you have a basic understanding of the physical and emotional effects. State your observations about their behaviors (e.g., I smelled vomit in the bathroom after you had been in there last night), instead of rumors you have heard about the person.
- Be knowledgeable about resources and sources of help for individuals with eating problems. It may be a tremendous relief for the person to get the “secret” out, and they may be very open to listening to you. On the other hand, beware that the person may be very defensive and get angry with you for bringing up this topic. They may not be ready to admit they have a problem yet.
- Remember that eating problems serve as an immediate solution for an individual’s problems, and that there are more serious problems underlying the eating disorder.
- Don’t get caught up in playing games with the person about weight, food, and appearance.
- DON’T nag them about their eating habits, weight concerns, or exercise habits. This can result in power struggles.
- DON’T spy on them.
- DON’T agree to help them control their eating by hiding food for them.
- DON’T get caught up in weight/appearance talk with them (e.g., agreeing that they look thin/thinner).
- If the person refuses to get help, or they won’t admit that their eating is a problem, keep the communication lines open with them. Tell them that you are available if they need to talk. Give them time. It is up to that individual to choose when they want to get help (with the exception of medical emergencies).
- Don’t take on their problem as your responsibility. Set limits for yourself and decide what you are willing and not willing to do to help this person. You can only do so much for the person. They are responsible for their own recovery.
- Be sure to take care of yourself throughout this process.
- Be aware that recovery from an eating disorder is often a long-term process, covering several months to several years. Most people who seek treatment for an eating disorder can recover, but it is sometimes a long, frustrating path.