

# Coping strategies for eating problems

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## Eating behaviors

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- Eat when you're hungry. Trust your body's messages about hunger. One way of getting in touch with your body's messages is to keep a chart of what you ate, when you ate, and what your feelings were before and after eating.
- Eat three or four regular meals a day, even if you overeat the day before.
- Eating regularly will keep your body from feeling deprived, and you'll be less likely to binge at night.
- Focus on health and well-being, rather than on calories and diets. Research has shown over and over that diets don't work, and they take away your choices to eat or not.
- Eat with partners, family, and friends, rather than eating alone. Feelings of isolation can lead to negative eating patterns.
- The more restricted your diet, the more likely it is that you will overeat or binge in order to quell feelings of hunger.

## Your body

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- Exercise regularly, but not compulsively.
- Be realistic about your weight and body shape. Body shape and size are to a large extent dictated by genetics
- Challenge unrealistic beliefs of body image and thinness.
- Learn to accept your body and be comfortable with your body, even when it does not meet the cultural standard of "perfect." Self-help books can be very useful in learning to feel more positive about your body.

## Emotions and stress

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- Examine your emotional hungers. We often eat for emotional as well as physical reasons. Ask yourself what you are feeling and why you want to eat more than your body needs.
- Ask yourself: What is it you want from food that you can get in another way? How can you nourish yourself without bingeing or eating compulsively?
- Determine what feelings you are "stuffing" down with food. Learn how to cope with feelings without abusing food or yourself.
- Nourish yourself with non-food related activities and relationships that give you enjoyment. Ask yourself the following questions:
  - What situations make you feel good? (avoid goal-directed activities such as being prepared for a class)
  - Which of your relationships are nurturing?
  - What do you do and say to make yourself feel good?
  - Make a list of these and do them!!!
- Learn relaxation and stress management techniques.
- Observe the strategies you employ to handle anger. Do you want to change these?
- Go to an assertiveness workshop if you have difficulty expressing yourself and your anger in an assertive manner.
- Read self-help books.
- Seek counseling (individual and/or group) in order to gain support, to get in touch with emotional hungers, and to find alternative ways of coping.

# How to help a friend with an eating problem

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- 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.