

Eating Disorders:

Conversation tips for friends and family

Are you worried that someone you care about has an eating disorder? Do you know someone who's being treated for an eating disorder? If so, you might be wondering what you can say or do to help.

Starting the conversation

Eating disorders can be serious and should always be treated by a professional. Talking to your friend or loved one may help them to begin treatment and get the support needed to recover.

Ideally, the person closest to someone suffering from an eating disorder should start the conversation. This can feel awkward, even scary, but don't wait. The sooner your friend or loved one can start treatment, the better the chance of recovery.

Being prepared for the conversation can help make it more effective. Here are some tips:

- **Learn about eating disorders.**
 - Ask about Intermountain Healthcare's ***Eating Disorders*** handout, which provides more information and a list of places to find more information.
 - Read about eating disorders on reliable websites, such as **NationalEatingDisorders.org** and the **National Institute of Mental Health**.
 - Talk to people who might be able to help, such as your doctor, close friends and family, or religious counselor.



What do I need to do next?

- 1 Learn about eating disorders and what resources are available to help.
- 2 Look for a good time to begin a private conversation with the friend or loved one who may have an eating disorder.
- 3 Review what to say and not say to those struggling with eating disorders (see **page 2**).

- **Set a time to talk.** Don't confront your friend or loved one when they're on the way out the door or in a public place. Set a time, and keep it private.
- **Choose your words carefully.** See **page 2** for examples of conversation DOs and DON'Ts.
- **Listen.** There's no way to predict what your loved one will say, so keep yourself open to different possibilities. Take the time to listen, and don't react negatively to their concerns.
- **Gently suggest professional help.** If your friend or loved one is willing, offer to go along with them. If they're hesitant, reiterate your concerns, but don't force treatment. End the conversation, and bring it up again at a later date.
- **Keep your door open.** Let your friend or loved one know you're there for them.

Conversation DOs and DON'Ts

You can have more productive and helpful conversations with your friend or loved one if you try to understand how they feel. Consider that they are likely to feel threatened and defensive. Use the tips below to try to keep your communication open, positive, and supportive.

Note: If you and your friend or family member are working with a care team, always follow the team's directions.

Topic	DO say	DON'T say
Threats and promises Threats don't help, and neither do promises you can't keep.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I'm worried about you. I want you to get treatment because I care about you. • You haven't been yourself lately. Can I do anything to help? • I want to make sure we both have the right support system/people helping us. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you don't get help, you're going to die! • If you don't eat this, I'm going to... • I promise I won't tell anyone. • I promise to support you, no matter what happens.
Behaviors Focus on positives, and avoid asking about eating disorder behaviors directly. Talk about behaviors that concern you using "I" language.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I really like it when you help the neighbors. • You're such a caring person. • I'm so proud that you made it to treatment today. I know it must be hard. • What does your day look like today? What can I do to help? • How do you feel about yourself? • How have you been feeling in general? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you sure you should exercise again? • Did you throw up today? • Have you lost/gained weight? • Did you make it to school/work today? • What does your doctor say?
Eating Don't force eating or conversations about food. Instead, offer support and keep yourself open.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there any foods you'd like me to keep in the house? • Let me know if you want me to make something specific if something sounds good to you. • Are you happy with what you ate today? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You just need to eat something. • What did you have for breakfast today? • Don't forget to take a granola bar with you. • Are you following your meal plan?
Appearance Don't comment on health or weight. Keep your comments more general.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It looks like you are having a good day. • Your eyes look very bright today. • Your hair looks nice today. • That's a great color on you. • That's a nice shirt. Is it new? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You look like you have gained weight. • You look healthy/good/better/more recovered today. • You look like you have been following the doctor's plan/making progress. • You must like how much better you look. • You look so much better not being so thin. • Have you gained weight?

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