

# How to Help Someone Who May Have an Eating Disorder

Live Well to  
Learn Well

Web:  
[health.cornell.edu](http://health.cornell.edu)

Phone (24/7):  
607-255-5155

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607-255-0269

Appointments:  
Monday–Saturday

*Check web for hours,  
services, providers,  
and appointment  
information*

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If you are concerned about a friend (or family member) who might have an eating disorder, you may be in a unique position to help. The most effective approach is a caring interaction. If your friend is not in treatment, the aim is to connect them to an experienced therapist, dietitian/nutritionist, or medical provider. Eating disorders do not usually go away on their own, and the earlier the treatment, the more likely that mental and physical complications may be reduced.

## Take into consideration ...

Who may be the best person to do the talking?

Pick an occasion to talk when:

- you are feeling calm
- you know you won't be interrupted, and
- the person you are speaking to will be comfortable

Consult with a knowledgeable person for support and assistance (for example: therapist, medical provider, dietitian/nutritionist or health educator).

Practice what you will say. A well-planned discussion can have a better impact and increase the likelihood that the person will be receptive.

Give some thought to the following points in order to be clear about what you want to say:

- What is worrying you about your friend?
- How do you feel about their behavior?
- What are your goals in talking to the person?

Keep in mind that you can stop the conversation at any time and continue at a later date.

## Guidelines for communication

Express your concern in a caring, non-judgmental way by using "I" statements, such as:

- "I am worried about you because you seem unhappy."
- "I am concerned about you. You seem to worry so much about your weight." or
- "It looks like you've been having a hard time, is there any way I can help?"

Coming from a place of curiosity and support is more helpful (e.g. "I've noticed your approach to eating/exercise has changed. Is everything okay?")

Invite the person to share their feelings with you. "Would you like to talk about it?" or "I often feel better after I talk something out with a friend. If you want to talk, I would be glad to listen."

Be supportive. Show the person you believe in them and avoid judgmental statements.



*Reflect back to your friend the behaviors that are concerning to you.*

Be specific as you reflect on the behaviors that concern you, without condemning the person or getting into an argument. "I've noticed that you talk a lot about your weight and body. I've noticed you haven't been coming out to dinner with us anymore – is everything okay?."

If your friend declines to talk, don't push. But consider checking back later. "If you ever want to talk, I'm available."

Unless the situation seems urgent, give the person a little time. But, if nothing happens and you are still concerned, talk to a professional about what to do next.

If your friend does confide in you, let them know you're there for support. "I'm so glad you felt comfortable opening up to me about this. How can I help support you?"

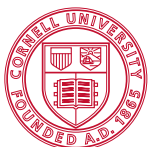
Watching the person eat or telling the person what to do is usually not helpful. It's best to ask how they would like you to help.

Note that if your friend asks a question such as, "Do I look fat?" a response such as, "No, you look great," may only reinforce the disorder. Instead say, "I care more about how you feel."

Also, avoid statements such as "Your meal is so healthy/unhealthy," or "Is that all you're going to eat today?"

## Lead up to a referral

"You seem to feel better talking about this with someone. Have you thought about talking with someone at Cornell Health?"



Offer to help make an appointment at Cornell Health with a dietitian/nutritionist, therapist, or medical provider in the Collaborative Health and Eating Program.

## Resources

**The Collaborative Health and Eating Program (CHEP)** provides confidential and interdisciplinary support for eating and body image concerns. To schedule an appointment, call 607-255-5155. More information is available at [health.cornell.edu/CHEP](http://health.cornell.edu/CHEP):



**Let's Talk** is a drop-in service that offers informal, private consultation with a Cornell Health counselor. More information is available at [health.cornell.edu/LetsTalk](http://health.cornell.edu/LetsTalk):



**Body Positive Cornell (BPC)** is a peer lead group that promotes holistic wellness practices that increase physical, mental, and emotional health using a weight-neutral, self-empowerment model. Learn more at [health.cornell.edu/BodyPositive](http://health.cornell.edu/BodyPositive):



**National Eating Disorders Association:** provides information and referrals for treatment across the US. Call 800-931-2237 or visit [nationaleatingdisorders.org](http://nationaleatingdisorders.org):



## What to do if you continue to be concerned

If you continue to be concerned about your friend, you can submit a "Student of Concern" form with Student Support and Advocacy Services (SSAS): [scl.cornell.edu/student-support](http://scl.cornell.edu/student-support). Staff from SSAS will reach out to the student (if appropriate), and will collaborate with campus partners to provide follow-up support.

## Reminder about self-care

When supporting others, it is important to prioritize your own self-care. Realize that you can't make anyone change, the person has to be ready.

Talk to someone about your own emotions, if you feel the need, and consult with a professional for further help. Visit [mentalhealth.cornell.edu](http://mentalhealth.cornell.edu) or [health.cornell.edu/mentalhealth](http://health.cornell.edu/mentalhealth).