



Supporting a friend with an eating disorder

If you have a friend with an eating disorder, you may be wondering how you can best support them. The fact that you're reading this information is a great start. Being informed and willing to learn about eating disorders is one of the best things you can do for your friend.

Before supporting your friend, it's important to acknowledge how *you* are feeling. When you first find out your friend has an eating disorder it can be a confusing time – it is common to feel a range of emotions. These feelings may include:

Sadness - a feeling that you have lost your friend and your relationship will never be the same. Sadness seeing your friend in distress.

Anger - at the disruption of your relationship and the situation in general.

Stress - regarding how to move forward and what you can do to help.

Acknowledging these emotions and speaking to trusted family, friends or a support service, such as the EDV Hub, can help you process how you're feeling.

If you're wondering how to speak to a friend that you are concerned may have an eating disorder, please see our 'How to Approach Someone' factsheet.

What you can do for your friend with an eating disorder

Encourage them to seek professional help

Overcoming an eating disorder can be very difficult without assistance, so accessing professional help is important. You can contact the EDV hub for advice and assistance in finding suitable professionals in your area.

Become informed

Seek out information about eating disorders in general and learn about your friend's eating disorder. The EDV website is a great place to start. The more educated you are, the more you'll be able to empathise and understand what they are going through, which may help you to better support them and yourself.

Separate the person from the eating disorder

Remind yourself that your friend's behaviour is a symptom of the eating disorder, rather than a reflection of their character. Accept that your friend's eating disorder is not their fault. By separating the person from the disorder, we are reminded of the person we knew before and the person they can become again.

Do things as you usually would and enjoy things together

It is important not to let the eating disorder become the focus of your friendship. Continue to enjoy things together that you have always done. Try not to make any changes to the activities you would normally do with them this includes outings, topics of conversation, meals out or other interests. Tell them about your own life and what is exciting or interesting to you. This may give them more hope towards recovery, when their mind won't be preoccupied with their body or food.

Take the focus off food and weight

The person with the eating disorder is already overly focused on food and weight issues. Don't talk negatively about your own body or appearance around someone with an eating disorder. Try not to put emphasis on the things you ate (for example, don't 'pat yourself on the back' for eating a salad or berate yourself for eating chocolate). Don't change your own eating habits around the person with an eating disorder but try not to make a big deal of it either.

Show compassion and care and listen without judgment

Understand that a person with an eating disorder is likely feeling distressed and confused. One of the most effective ways you can support them is by telling them that you care and that you will always be there to support them.

Discuss your concerns with others

Speak with a parent, teacher or find professional help for yourself. The EDV hub can provide support for people concerned about a loved one with an eating disorder.

Be patient

Eating disorders are complicated and recovery can take some time. It is important to remind yourself that the person does not want to be unwell, but they lack the ability to overcome the disorder quickly. There is no specific time-frame for recovery.

What you can say to a friend with an eating disorder

It can be really hard to find the right words – you want someone to know that you care but you don't want to trigger someone or make things more difficult.

Generally, it is better to start sentences with **"I"** and not **"You"** and to stick to what you have observed. For example instead of saying "You need help!", which can sound accusatory, say "I would really like to help you feel better about yourself and would like us to try and get some help". Ask the person questions and try not to make any presumptions about how they might be feeling or their circumstances.

Here is a list of phrases you can use to start conversation or simply to show that you are there to support your friend.

"I love you/ I care about you and I don't think of you any differently".

"I might not understand, but if you need someone to talk to, I will help as much as I can".

"How are you doing today?"

"How can I best be a friend to you during this time?"

"Let's (do fun activity, go out for coffee, take a walk, watch a movie, have dinner, anything you would normally enjoy!) together".

"I will never stop caring about you".

"I will be here for you whenever you need my support".

"I believe in you".

"I'm really proud of you this must be really hard".

It's ok to hit pause

Supporting a friend with an eating disorder can be tough, and it's ok to admit that. You may need to take some time out to look after your own mental health and wellbeing. Maybe talk to your friend about hitting 'pause' on things for a while if your friendship is under particular strain. Make a promise that you will both reach out when feeling a little better and reignite the friendship in a way that works for both of you.

Don't forget EDV is here to help

If you are concerned about yourself or someone else, EDV are here to listen and help. Contact the EDV Hub on 1300 550 236 between 9.30am – 4.30pm, Monday – Friday or email edv@eatingdisorders.org.au

