

# Eating disorders and my friend who has difficulty with food

## A guide for young people who have friends with eating and body image problems

It can be quite frightening when a friend begins to display some of the signs of disordered eating. Disordered eating behaviours can include skipping meals and losing weight; compulsively exercising; thinking you're fat when you are not; binge eating; becoming withdrawn; vomiting after eating; and appearing depressed, anxious, irritable or moody.

## What do you do? Do you ignore it, discuss it with them or talk to a teacher or adult?

It is important that your friend is encouraged to seek help, after all, the sooner a person decides to acknowledge and address the eating disorder the better. Here are some guidelines that might help you to know how to encourage your friend to seek help and how you can support them while they fight their eating disorder.

## What should be the first thing I do?

Approach a Student Counsellor, Guidance Officer, Youth Worker, teacher or an adult you feel comfortable with. Talk about how you feel about what is happening with your friend. Your attitudes will affect the way you relate to your friend and seeing a friend in distress can make you feel

unsure about yourself. It can therefore be useful to talk with an adult about what you think about "thinness", "fat", dieting, and your own body.

## Simple research

Gain some understanding about eating problems from organisations such as EDV or from an adult you can trust. Eating disorders are not just about food or weight. They are often about deeper problems that the young person finds too difficult or painful to address directly. This can make them feel like they are out of control, and food can become the way that they attempt to regain control. Other young people may have similarly unhelpful ways of handling their feelings when they feel unmanageable. Some may use drugs, become withdrawn, some use casual sex and some abuse alcohol.

## Does your friend need help?

Your friend does need professional help. However remember you are not responsible for getting them help. A student counsellor, guidance officer, youth worker, teacher or other adult that you trust will be able to help you to decide the support you need and how to best assist your friend.

## Some tips to help you talk to your friend

It is important to be as open as possible with your friend. Tell them that because you are concerned about them, you are going to speak

to someone so that they can get support. Invite them to come with you so they feel included, but don't feel upset if they find it too difficult.

Sometimes when a friend has told us about an eating problem, they have sworn us to secrecy. If you are really worried about your friend, and you know that they need help, you may want to tell someone else. At the same time you might be scared that your friend will be angry with you for telling their secret. In most cases, you will have a gut feeling about the right thing to do. If someone is really in trouble, you should talk to someone else about getting him or her some help. Your friend may be angry with you at first but they will eventually understand why you had to tell.

Remember your friend is still the same person, but their thoughts about their weight, food and body have become distorted. If you and other friends can be understanding and relate to them as normally as possible it helps them to stay in touch with the person they really are, and this may help them to want to get well.

However it is not your responsibility to fix their problem. Believe in them and that they can, and will, address what is happening for them. But remember only they can decide that for themselves.

# Eating disorders and my friend

## Is there anything I should avoid talking about?

Try to avoid commenting on what someone is or isn't eating. When you go out places and know there is food there, don't be embarrassed to ask your friend to come with you or to ask if they want a drink or something to eat. They may say "no" but still ask them. Be normal. If you have lollies, chips or chocolate ask them if they want one, just as you would ask another friend.

Also try to avoid commenting on people's appearance. No matter what you say it could be misinterpreted. Your friend probably worries about their weight all the time.

## What happens to someone when they have an eating disorder?

Remember that your friend is unwell and they will be different for a while. Sometimes young people become so sick that they have to go to hospital. This can be very distressing for friends and family, so if you choose to visit them in hospital, try to prepare yourself and make sure that you have support. If they can have visitors you may decide to visit them, or otherwise you could send a card letting them know that you are thinking of them.

Try to remind your friend of all the positive things about recovery, and how much they deserve to feel better about themselves.

## What about me?

There may be times when you feel unable to relate normally to your friend. This is okay. We all need 'time-

out' sometimes from life's stresses. Decide what help you need and take time to relax and take care of yourself.

Being a friend of someone with an eating disorder can be really tough; let other people know if you're having trouble dealing with it.

Sometimes people who have an eating disorder change and may stop calling you or not want to spend time with you. This can be really upsetting. You might understand that they are unwell, but you might also be really angry about the way that they are treating you.

It is normal to be angry and upset if you think you are losing a friend. In most cases, although you might feel like you have done something wrong, your friend is not rejecting you. It is just that they are going through a really hard time and they may find talking about it too difficult, even to you. Sometimes it is really hard, but be patient and hang in there; your friend will get better and your friendship will have another chance.

It is also okay sometimes to let them know that you are aware that they are having a hard time and to remind them that you are their friend. Try not to push them if they don't want to talk. It is important to do this with the support of an understanding adult.

Remember it is important that you take care of yourself and take time to relax and do things that you enjoy.

## Remind yourself and your friend that...

Recovery is possible for everyone. The chances of recovery are increased significantly if suitable professional help



is received as early as possible. The process is often long and slow and it can be a very challenging time for both those who are unwell and those who care for them. With hindsight, those who have come through it often consider their recovery to have been a positive and rewarding experience.