

Navigating Difficult Conversations

There is no right or wrong way to talk to someone with an eating disorder. Different approaches will work for different people. It also may depend on your relationship with the person and where they are in their recovery journey.

Sometimes people experiencing an eating disorder will find it difficult to talk about what is going on for them. They might not have the words to describe how they are feeling or may be worried that others will judge or worry about them. Some people may be angry and frustrated with themselves and push others away to cope with this.

Many families and friends worry that they will say the wrong thing, or they may have been pushed away in the past. The important thing is to let the person know you care and that you are willing to listen and be there for them.

You could suggest that while you do not have all the answers, you can work with them to find a way forward.

"I often feel helpless because it feels like I can't give my friend the support she needs. I used to be so anxious that I would say the wrong thing, so I didn't say anything at all. But that wasn't helping — it's much better to be proactive in offering support."

- Olivia, friend

General Tips

- **Listen without judgement.** People can have intense feelings during the recovery journey, especially if they have had a setback. While it can be hard to listen to distressing thoughts and feelings, it is important to allow the person to talk without judgement or criticism.
- **Avoid starting difficult conversations when you are tired or emotionally drained.** Wait until you are feeling prepared for anything that may come up.
- **Avoid starting difficult conversations at mealtimes** or around food.

- **Try not to take on the role of a therapist.** You do not need to have all the answers. It is most important to listen and create a space for the person to talk.
- **Talk your feelings over with a health professional, counsellor or friend,** especially if you have strong reactions to the behaviour of the person you care for. This way, your feelings will not impact your conversations with the person, and you can remain calm and supportive during conversations.
- **Think about your body language.** The person will pick up how you are feeling from the way you act, not just from the things you say.
- **If you do not know how to respond to something, be honest and say so.** No one has all the answers.
- **Be kind to yourself.** Supporting someone through an eating disorder can be draining for all involved. Keep a check on your mood and seek support when you need it.

What to Avoid

- **Avoid focusing on food, exercise or body shape and weight.** Instead, try talking about how the person is feeling and focus on other aspects of their life.
- **Avoid discussions about dieting, calories, and body shape.**
- **Do not use language that implies blame** or implies that the person is doing something wrong. For example, instead of saying "You are making me worried," you can say, "I am worried about you."
- **Avoid unhelpful, blaming comments** like "just eat more food" or "why is it so hard for you to stop bingeing?"
- **Avoid statements that could be interpreted as manipulative.** For example, avoid statements like, "Think about what you are doing to me." This can make it more difficult for the person to be open about what is going on.
- **Avoid threatening statements.** For example, "If you don't eat I will..." This can severely impact on the person's emotions and may undermine trust between the two of you.

Using the right words

The way language is used is important when talking about eating disorders. Some language can be isolating for people experiencing an eating disorder.

Below are some examples of preferred and problematic language that you may find helpful:

Issue	Problematic	Preferred
Labelling a person by their illness. This can lead to the person feeling alienated or stigmatised.	Calling the person the 'anorexic', 'bulimic' or 'binger'.	Say that the person is living with, has a diagnosis of, or is being treated for an eating disorder.
Language that suggests a lack of quality of life for people with an eating disorder.	Saying that the person is afflicted by or the victim of an eating disorder.	Say that the person is living with or has a diagnosis of an eating disorder.
Language that places a value judgement on appearance. This increases risk in people who are vulnerable.	Thin, skinny, fat, overweight, etc.	Language that does not focus on size or appearance.

"Sometimes people call my son "the bulimic" and I have to remind him that he is so much more than the illness. The eating disorder is not a part of his identity, it is not a part of his character – it is a disorder he is fighting. I don't want it to define the way he sees himself."

- Karen, mother