



The Center for Eating Disorders
AT SHEPPARD PRATT

Conversation Starter



If someone you care about is struggling, reaching out and checking in can be a critical first step in helping him or her get the help they need. It can be difficult, but at the appropriate time and place, you can start a meaningful conversation.

Because each individual and situation is different, there is no universal way to approach tough discussions – but if you're concerned that someone close to you is showing signs of an eating disorder, the following tips can serve as a helpful and recovery-focused guide.

1 Prepare for the Conversation

One of the most useful things you can do to prepare is educate yourself. Learn about the different types of eating disorders as well as general signs and symptoms (www.eatingdisorder.org/eating-disorder-information/overview/) associated with them. You can also locate available resources, like support groups, in advance and have the details on hand when you begin your conversation.

Before you check in, learn about the underlying risk factors for eating disorders and updated research on how they develop. **Basic education can help dispel common misunderstandings about eating disorders that can get in the way of providing effective support. For example, eating disorders are biological illnesses, not a choice or a lifestyle, and they often occur alongside anxiety and depression.** Keeping this in mind during a discussion with someone you're concerned about can help facilitate more compassionate conversations.

If you aren't sure whether your concerns warrant a check-in conversation, The Center for Eating Disorders at Sheppard Pratt has resources to guide you.

The confidential Online Assessment (www.eatingdisorder.org/assess) is a tool you can use any time that is designed to help you think through the overall physical, emotional and behavioral patterns associated with a wide range of eating disorders. It is designed to assess the presence of disordered thoughts and behaviors related to food, weight, body image and exercise.

The Center's fact sheet is another tool that can help you identify inaccurate perceptions about eating disorders and tackle common stereotypes. The more informed you are, the better prepared you will be to help.

2 Timing is Important

As eager as you might be to express your concerns, keep in mind that if someone is struggling with disordered eating, they may experience feelings of guilt, embarrassment, or denial when approached about it. All of these feelings can make it difficult to communicate clearly and calmly, but choosing the right time and place can help.

Always start with a one-on-one conversation. Choose an environment and situation that will help you and the person you care about feel

calm and comfortable, knowing everyone's privacy is being respected. Think about the timeframe that might be best to begin the conversation. Allow for plenty of time when you won't be interrupted and neither person is overly tired or distracted by other obligations. Remember, one conversation may not be enough to fully express your concerns. Again, this is normal and natural: everyone has a different capacity for challenging conversations and emotions. Follow-up conversations will likely be necessary in moving towards healing.

3 Choosing the Right Language

When planning to check in with a friend or family member, consider in advance how you will talk about your concerns. Remember that eating disorders have complex causes and they are about much more than a person's weight, despite how they might be portrayed in the media.

As natural as it may feel to mention changes in a person's weight as your cause for concern, try not to focus on that when you check in. **If a person is struggling with negative body image, focusing on changes in weight can reinforce a harmful belief that their weight is the most important thing about them.** Furthermore, something you say with great concern might be misconstrued. For example, telling a friend that you're worried because they've *"lost so much weight"* could be received as a compliment by someone with an active eating disorder and a distorted view of their own body.

What else can you focus on? Try highlighting changes you've noticed in their personality,

energy levels or how they spend their time. For example, have their priorities shifted? You might say something like, *"your volunteer work has always been so important to you. I was concerned when you missed our last three committee meetings to stay later at the gym."* You can also point to personal goals with which an eating disorder may be interfering.

Many people with eating disorders struggle with negative self-esteem. In expressing your concern, be careful not to criticize or shame the person. Instead of challenging a loved one with questions like *"why don't you ever come out anymore?"* you could say, *"I've noticed you've stopped attending our staff luncheons and we all really miss your smile."* When highlighting the consequences of the eating disorder, it's always a good idea to remind your loved one of their strengths and the things you appreciate about them.

4 Actively Listen

Be sure to listen to and acknowledge what your conversation partner is saying, even if it isn't what you want to hear. If they are expressing frustration or fear about going to see a doctor, let them know, *"I hear you and I know it's not an easy thing to do."* **Acknowledging your friend's thoughts and feelings is essential for keeping the lines of communication open going forward.**

Show them you are listening and reiterate your support and willingness to help. Consider asking, *"Is there anything specific you'd like me to do to help?"* or *"what would be the most helpful thing I could do to support you in getting treatment?"* This might be helping them make a phone call, accompanying them to a support group, or researching their insurance benefits.

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What if Someone Isn't Ready to Talk?

Although we have the best of intentions when checking in with people we care about, it is wise to plan for some level of resistance, or even denial that there's a problem. Try to remain calm and patient. Showing your authentic support to a loved one can help them feel more open to talking about their personal experiences. You could say, *"I can tell you're not ready to talk about this right now, but know that I care about you and I'm here for you when you are ready."*

Evidence shows that early intervention for eating disorders is always best, but it's particularly important for children and adolescents. More than half of adolescent girls and one-third of adolescent boys have used unhealthy weight control behaviors. These behaviors can quickly escalate into

serious eating disorders if left untreated. Parents are advised to seek swift medical help if their son or daughter is displaying any signs of an eating disorder. While supportive and compassionate check-in conversations are still beneficial for youth, caregivers are encouraged to take the lead in guiding kids and teens towards supportive treatment with specialized child and adolescent care following these conversations. If you have questions about our programming for families, please contact us.

If the person you're concerned about is an adult who is resistant to seeking help, you might consider attending a support group or collaborative care workshop to learn more about eating disorders and how to best provide him or her with recovery-focused support.

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The Next Step to Recovery

You've checked in with a friend or loved one to express your concern and offer support. Are they open to seeking help? If so, be sure to connect with a reputable source of **evidence-based treatment** to discuss individualized resources and next steps. The Center for Eating Disorders at Sheppard Pratt offers **free and confidential phone**

assessments and a wide range of treatment options to help individuals and families. Through a stepped-care approach and using therapeutic modalities backed by research, The Center's multidisciplinary staff is able to offer comprehensive services matched to each individual's needs. Call **410-943-2121** today.

Supportive conversations are an important step on the road to recovery.

A trusted and accurate diagnosis can be an important next step. Evaluation and treatment options, like those offered at The Center for Eating Disorders at Sheppard Pratt, are available for men, women, adolescents and children.

Visit www.eatingdisorder.org to learn more about eating disorders, assessment and evidence-based treatment.