

WHO

The individual closest to the person of concern is the best person to initiate the conversation. Even small groups can be intimidating.

It may be helpful to talk with your friends or even consult with a professional before speaking with the person.

WHERE/WHEN

Choose a private space and allow plenty of time for discussion.

Approach your friend after you have considered what you want to say. Practicing or writing down your thoughts in advance may help reduce your anxiety.

WHY

Reflect upon your reasons for wanting to talk with your friend, and be clear in your own mind about your goals.

- Concern for your friend's health?
- A desire to improve the relationship?
- A desire to have your friend know that you care?
- Frustration for the way your friend's behavior affects others or your physical space?

WHAT To Say

Share your feelings using "I" statements.

- **"I'm concerned about your health and worried that you are having difficulty taking care of yourself."**

Describe why you are concerned by sharing specific moments when you noticed worrisome behavior. Be direct, but not accusatory.

- **"I haven't seen you at lunch with us recently. How have you been?"**

Encourage your friend to seek help and considering offering to assist in finding resources.

What NOT To Say

Avoid focusing on appearance or weight since this is usually misinterpreted. For example, "You're so thin" may be heard as encouragement to continue dieting by some, or a petty attempt to gain a competitive advantage by others.

Avoid battling about eating or exercise. The person will likely make excuses or become defensive. Remain supportive and concerned.

HOW Your Friend May React

Denial or defensiveness: Your friend may feel that there is not a problem or may feel ashamed of being discovered.

- **"Thanks for your concern, but I'm really fine."** Remind them of what you have noticed and why you remain concerned.
- **"I'm just getting in shape like everyone else."** Let your friend know that you understand the desire to be fit, but are concerned about their approach.
- **"Mind your own business!"** Respond with, "I understand this must be difficult to talk about. I really care about you and am here to listen any time."

Relief: Some people feel relieved—they can stop pretending everything is all right. However...*expressed* relief may come hours, days, or years later.

Admission of Problem: The person may be able to admit something is really wrong, once someone else realizes that there is a problem, but *don't count on it or view your attempt at talking as a failure if admission of the problem is not achieved*. Every drop in the bucket adds up over time.

REMEMBER . . .

This discussion is likely to be difficult and may take several conversations. It is not necessary that everything be said at once.

Your friend may refuse help even after repeated attempts. Don't travel this path alone! It is important to consult with a professional about what to do next.

Make no promises of confidentiality during the conversation, since you will likely need to talk with others for your own support or the support of your friend.

Your efforts are valuable. You may be one of several people talking with your friend and it makes a difference, even if it doesn't appear so right away!

Change takes time. Continue to be supportive of your friend. Avoid taking on the role of counselor or food monitor. Instead, ask your friend about their preference regarding your involvement and how you can be helpful.

Take care of yourself. You may have feelings of anger, sadness, loss or fear that would be helpful to share with someone. Consider seeking additional support through family, friends, clergy or mental health professionals about your situation.

RESOURCES FOR YOU AND YOUR FRIEND

On-Grounds Counseling Support
Counseling & Psychological Services
(CAPS) 434-243-5150
studenthealth.virginia.edu/caps

Maxine Platzer Lynn Women's Center
434-982-2252
womenscenter.virginia.edu
(Visit the Center's library for a collection of eating disorder/body image resources)

Mary D. Ainsworth Psychological Clinic
434-982-4737
psychology.as.virginia.edu/ainsworth

For More Information:
nationaleatingdisorders.org

For Additional Information:
Siegel, M., Brisman, J., Weinshel, M. (1997).
Surviving an eating disorder: Strategies for family and friends. New York: Harper-Collins.

TALKING TO A FRIEND WITH DISORDERED EATING

**The Who, What, Where, When,
Why, and How to Help**

