



### **Resource: How to approach someone with an eating disorder**

Most of us have at one point or another suspected a loved one, a friend, or even a complete stranger as having an eating disorder. It can be a daunting task, trying to think of how best to assist in firstly, establishing that there is a problem, and secondly, encouraging the person to seek help.

Before you make your approach, it's important to ask yourself what indicates to you that this person has an eating disorder. Be cautious not to make the mistake of assuming that because a person is very thin they must be eating disordered. Eating disorders present at all sizes and are serious regardless of what size a person is at. It's better to consider a cluster of signs and symptoms (<http://bodymatters.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/signssymptoms1.pdf>) before making your approach.

Once you have determined there is enough evidence to warrant concern, we suggest trying the following:

1. Educate yourself about eating disorders. Remember that eating disorders are about low self-esteem, insecurity, fear and other unresolved issues. The abnormal behaviours towards food and weight are merely the observable symptoms of this psychological illness.
2. Approach the person at a neutral time, not just after a fight or in a heated moment (particularly if this has been about food).
3. Privacy is essential. When you do speak to the person, take care to do so in a space where other people can't overhear your conversation. Choose a time when the conversation will not be rushed. Also please note that most sufferers feel ashamed of their disorder, so taking a non-judgemental and caring tone (rather than accusatory) is best.
4. Be frank about what you have seen or what others are worrying about. Try to be specific and base your comments on actual behaviours, not your interpretations. And don't just focus on food and weight- focus on your concern for their well-being. Indicate you've noticed a change in their mood and behaviour.
5. Don't bring in the fact that "everyone" is worried. This might make the person feel guilty, or like people have been talking behind their back.
6. Listen to what they are saying – sometimes the person might just want to talk. Make it clear they have your full attention and are listening properly.
7. Sufferers are likely to respond in different ways, depending on what stage of their eating disorder they are at. Be prepared for them to react with anger and denial. Don't push the issue, just let them know you will always be there for them if they ever need to talk.

8. Do not make promises you can't keep. Explain that there are situations where parents and carers and doctors etc may have to be informed (if the person is a minor), but that you will always try to be upfront with the sufferer about what you intend to do. A "special relationship" is not enough to save a sufferer. Even experts in treating people with eating disorders usually involve numerous treating parties because eating disorders are so complex.
9. Strongly encourage them to seek professional help, especially from an eating disorders specialist as eating disorders are highly complex illnesses.
10. Remember- the earlier the eating disorder behaviour is acknowledged and treated, the greater the prognosis for recovery.