



How to Support a Friend With an Eating Disorder

What Is an Eating Disorder?

An eating disorder is a mental illness that affects someone's eating habits and the way they feel about their body. If your friend has an eating disorder, they may focus a lot on how their diet affects their weight or appearance. This can cause them to eat less than they should or develop other harmful eating behaviours. Anorexia, bulimia, and binge-eating are the most common eating disorders.

If you're trying to help a friend who has an eating disorder, know that you're not alone. Since the pandemic began, there has been an increase in the number of kids and teens with eating disorders. About 1 million Canadians have been diagnosed with an eating disorder, and 95% of these people are between 12 and 25 years old. Eating disorders are more common in women, but it's important to remember that boys can develop eating disorders, too: one in seven men experience an eating disorder before they turn 40.



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Supporting a friend with an eating disorder can be emotionally exhausting at times, but there are many ways to help them through recovery! Here are some things you can do to provide good support:

- **Provide a safe, non-judgemental space.** One of the most helpful things you can do for your friend is listen to them without judging them or putting them down. Remind them that you are concerned because you deeply care about them and value them as a friend. You can make them feel more comfortable by pointing out that there's no reason to feel ashamed. Eating disorders are common, and many people seek treatment and recover.
- **Encourage them to seek help.** Some people may feel embarrassed to take the first step and talk to a doctor or counsellor. Reassure your friend that mental health professionals aren't there to criticize or judge them – they're there to help. You can also offer to help your friend search for treatment options if they are ready to reach out.
- **Avoid commenting on their appearance.** If you are worried about your friend's health, your first reaction might be to express concern or even get upset with them about their appearance. However, talking to them about how they look can sometimes do more harm than good. It's best to avoid the topic of appearance altogether, and express concern about *behaviours* you've observed. For example, instead of commenting on their size, you could tell them you've noticed they haven't been eating as much lately.



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- **Start with “I” instead of “you.”** Saying “I’m concerned about your eating habits” is more effective than saying “You are not eating enough.” Starting with the word “you” may cause your friend to become angry or defensive. On the other hand, starting with “I” can help express care and concern.
- **Be open to learning.** Learning more about the symptoms of your friend’s eating disorder can help you gain a better understanding of their experience, which will make it easier for you to support them. Getting educated on nutrition and weight loss can help as well: if your friend believes false information about these topics, you’ll be able to gently correct them and tell them the facts.
- **Care for your own mental health, too.** When you are providing a friend with support, it’s important to focus on your own wellbeing and self-care. Be patient and kind to yourself during their recovery. Realize that there’s no need to blame yourself or anyone else if they have a relapse. Talk to trusted friends or family about how you’re feeling, and don’t hesitate to reach out to a mental health professional yourself.

It's difficult to watch a friend struggle with an eating disorder. By staying compassionate, positive, and non-judgemental, you can support their recovery and encourage them to get the help they need. Learning more about your friend’s disorder and providing a listening ear can help them feel secure and accepted. Finally, remember that your mental health matters, and practicing self-care is even more important when you’re supporting someone else.