

Eating Disorders: How to Intervene with a Loved One

An eating disorder is a serious and potentially life-threatening disease that can affect a person's physical and mental health. Early intervention is essential for a successful recovery. If you are worried that a family member or friend might have an eating disorder, it is important to express your concerns as soon as possible in a loving and supportive way.

1. Set a time to talk.

Find a time and place that is free from distractions to allow for a private and relaxed discussion.

2. Communicate your concerns.

Share specific situations when you felt concerned about their eating or exercise behaviors. Convey that you think these actions may indicate that there is a problem and that you are concerned about their health.

3. Get professional help.

Ask your loved one to seek assistance from a counselor, doctor, nutritionist or other health professional who is knowledgeable about eating issues. If you feel comfortable, offer to help make an appointment or accompany them on their first visit. It can be helpful to be prepared with a list of trusted healthcare professionals.

It might take several interventions before the person you care for agrees to seek treatment. But don't give up! Eating disorders have the highest mortality of any mental illness, and recovery takes time and professional expertise.

What Not to Do

Avoid conflicts or a battle of the wills.

If your loved one refuses to acknowledge that there is a problem, restate your feelings and the reasons for them and leave yourself open and available as a supportive listener. Make it clear that you will continue to be there to discuss any challenges they are facing.

Avoid shame, blame, or guilt.

Do not use accusatory "you" statements like, "You just need to eat" or, "You are acting irresponsibly." Instead, use "I" statements. For example: "I'm concerned about you because you refuse to eat breakfast or lunch," or, "I noticed that you missed some meetings because you were still at the gym when you needed to be at work."

Do not comment on how they look.

Your loved one is already too aware of their body. Even if you are trying to compliment them, comments about weight or appearance only reinforce their obsession with body image and weight.

Avoid giving simple solutions.

For example, "If you'd just stop, then everything would be fine!" Express your continued support. Remind them that you care and want them to be healthy and happy.