

# CHARLOTTE parent

## How to Talk About Eating Disorders

By: Ashley Sheil

Comments about diets, body dissatisfaction and exercise routines are so frequent that we may not even notice that they are taking place. These interactions, however, usually do not address questions like when is healthy too healthy? When is exercise excessive? Is this a temporary diet or an eating disorder?

Anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorder are the three most common eating disorders and can be life-threatening when undetected and untreated. The opportunity for full recovery is maximized through knowledge of the signs and symptoms of an eating disorder and early intervention. An eating disorder – in any form – affects not only the person living with the disorder, but family and friends who often feel powerless to effectively intervene.

Fear of a loved one, child or friend getting mad, withdrawing from the relationship or possibly causing the person's eating disorder to worsen may keep some individuals from taking a risk to speak up about concerns. Though these fears exist, it is important to understand that eating disorders are not fads, phases or eccentricities that resolve on their own. Although often extremely difficult, if you think someone you love has an eating disorder, it's important to talk with them. Here are some suggestions for broaching the topic.

### **Set the Stage**

Talk to the person in a calm state, and free from distraction or interruption. Being empathic and caring is just as important as the content of the conversation itself.

### **Share What You Have Noticed**

Mention specific evidence or instances that suggest disorders eating. Do not focus on appearance or weight; instead talk about health and relationships.

### **Talk About Change**

Help identify the positive reasons to change and the consequences of staying the same. Change is difficult; focusing on what the individual values may be helpful in building motivation.

### **Offer Help**

While a strong support system is extremely valuable, professional help is needed to address the eating disorder. Encouragement to speak with a professional is essential.

### **Be Patient Yet Persistent**

Do not give up. Just as eating disorders do not develop overnight, recommendations for help are often not readily accepted. Continue to suggest professional help and point out the benefits of change. This takes time, and usually more than one conversation. The situation may require the assistance of an outside expert for an assessment or intervention.

### **Top Warning Signs of an Eating Disorder**

*Conversations about food, exercise, body shape and size regularly talk place in daily life, but how can the signs and symptoms of an eating disorder be identified? The development of an eating disorder involves a perfect storm of many factors, and there is rarely a single cause, says Ashley Sheil, licenses marriage and family therapist, and site director at The Renfrew Center of North Carolina. Obsession around food, weight and body shape, plus a distorted or negative self-image can be signs of an eating disorder. Withdrawal from normal social activities, including meals with others, and unusual food rituals including cutting food into small pieces, eating slowly, eating unusual food combinations, in addition to irritability, mood swings and restlessness are also possible signs.*

*An individual may have symptoms of more than one diagnostic category and may not fully meet the diagnostic criteria for one specific disorder, but this does not preclude the need for treatment, Sheil says. Approaching someone who exhibits symptoms of an eating disorder is a delicate task, but conversations are crucial in order to address the emotional and physical toll of an eating disorder. Flip to page 18 for tips on how to talk to someone you think may have an eating disorder.*