

How To Support a Friend

If you have a friend who is already getting help for an eating disorder, this fact sheet is for you. If you suspect your friend may have an eating disorder and want to know how to raise the subject, you may find our fact sheet 'How to Approach Someone You Care About' more helpful.

Supporting a friend with an eating disorder can be challenging, but it can make a big difference to their recovery.

The first thing to do is make sure you understand some key facts about eating disorders:

- Don't assume that an eating disorder is all about food. It might not seem logical, but food is rarely the underlying issue. Food and negative body image and self talk is often a way of trying to cope with deeper emotional distress.
- People with eating disorders often have strong beliefs that they themselves are deeply flawed and not worthy of attention or help. Your support can help them overcome these beliefs.
- Looking healthy and being well are very different things when it comes to eating disorders. A person recovering from an eating disorder may look like they are back to normal, but the negative thoughts can still be there and they still need your support, sometimes for a long time.

Things you can do

Here are some tips on what to do to support your friend:

- A person with an eating disorder can feel very isolated and alone. The most important thing you can do is help your friend stay connected with you and other friends. It's really important for them to keep doing their normal activities as much as possible while being treated for an eating disorder.
- Tell your friend you care about them and will try to support them as much as you can (but beware of making promises you can't keep, like saying you'll be there all the time for them).
- Include your friend in invitations and normal group activities just as you would have done before the eating disorder. Don't be discouraged if they choose not to get involved this time; keep asking.
- Act normally around food, even when you are with your friend. If you are going out somewhere and there is likely to be food involved, don't avoid asking your friend to come with you. If you are asking a group of friends if they want something to eat or drink, or handing round lollies or chocolates, include this friend, just as you would any other friend. If they say 'no', that's fine. It is not your job to monitor what your friend eats or doesn't eat.



- Encourage your friend to talk about the normal, daily, non-eating disorder parts of their life as much as possible and avoid focusing on the eating disorder.
- Encourage your friend to talk about their feelings with open questions, such as ‘how are you feeling today?’, and then try to listen to their answer without judging or interrupting, even if you don’t agree with some of what they say.
- Be a voice of encouragement when your friend seems tired of the struggle to recover. Remind them of all the positive things about recovery – for example, things that they used to like to do and will be able to do again once they are well.
- Discourage negative self-talk by distracting them onto other subjects and by reminding them of their achievements and progress, no matter how small.
- Remind your friend frequently that recovery is possible.
- Let your friend know that they can call or email the Butterfly Support Line for further support and encouragement.

Things to avoid

It is important to avoid doing or saying things that might make your friend feel ashamed or guilty. For instance, you should try to avoid:

- Being critical of your friend
- Giving simple solutions to overcoming problems, such as saying things like “all you have to do is eat”
- Making generalisations such as ‘never’ and ‘always’ (e.g. “you’re always moody” or “you never want to do anything but exercise”)
- Saying or implying that what your friend is doing is ‘disgusting’, ‘stupid’ or ‘self-destructive’
- Trying to solve your friend’s problems for them
- Getting drawn into a conversation about food, weight, shape or even clothes
- Talking about appearance. Any reference to appearance can be interpreted negatively. Even saying, “You look so well” can mean “You look fat” to someone in recovery. If you want to pay your friend a compliment, try to focus on qualities that don’t relate to the way they look.

Supporting a friend can be hard work sometimes. If you need support or help on how to best support your friend, call our [Support Line on 1800 ED HOPE \(1800 33 4673\)](tel:1800334673) or email us at support@thebutterflyfoundation.org.au

