

# What do if you are *concerned*

## A guide for parents

Watch the accompanying video [here](#)



It is always better to do something, rather than nothing.

Early intervention can reduce the severity and duration of more serious body image and eating issues and can make a full recovery more likely.

It can sometimes be challenging to know if a young person's attitudes and behaviours involving their body, eating and physical activity are typical or are a signal of something more serious. If you are concerned that your child may be developing or experiencing serious body image and eating issues it is important to **trust your instincts**, learn more and if you suspect an eating disorder is developing, to seek help. Follow the steps on the next page to help you talk to your teen about your concerns.

If you can answer yes to one or more of these questions about someone you care for, we recommend seeking help from a GP or health professional:

- Is food, exercise or health dominating the person's life?
- Is the person worried about being higher weight even if they appear to be of average size, or lower weight?
- Does the person compensate after eating or exercise habits changed significantly?
- Is the person hiding food or eating in secret?
- Does the person's appearance, weight or size affect how they feel about themselves?

For more on warning signs, read the Body Kind Families Factsheet: – [When to be concerned](#).

For interactive, early intervention tools for parents please visit:

[www.feedyourinstinct.com.au](http://www.feedyourinstinct.com.au)  
[www.reachoutandrecover.com.au](http://www.reachoutandrecover.com.au)  
[www.howfaristoo far.org.au](http://www.howfaristoo far.org.au)

### EATING DISORDER TREATMENT

Eating disorders are complex mental illness requiring professional help. Treatment usually involves a range of approaches involving a number of different professionals. With early and appropriate treatment and support, recovery from an eating disorder is possible.

For guides for both individual and families on accessing support and treatment visit: [www.everymind.org.au/navigating-your-way-to-health](http://www.everymind.org.au/navigating-your-way-to-health). There is also further information on Butterfly's website [here](#)

### FURTHER RESOURCES

#### For Families:

- Eating Disorders Families Australia (EDFA) [www.edfa.org.au](http://www.edfa.org.au)
- Additional resources from Butterfly - Fact sheets, further information and tip sheets on caring for a loved one [butterfly.org.au/resources/](http://butterfly.org.au/resources/)
- Evidence-based resources to support families experiencing an eating disorder [butterfly.org.au/get-involved/shop/](http://butterfly.org.au/get-involved/shop/)

#### For Teenagers:

- headspace - Information for young people – [headspace.org.au/young-people](http://headspace.org.au/young-people)
- KidsHelpline (Teen resources) - [kidshelpline.com.au/teens](http://kidshelpline.com.au/teens)
- Butterfly National Helpline - [butterflynationalhelpline.org.au](http://butterflynationalhelpline.org.au)

If your teen does not feel comfortable talking to a person in their life, encourage them to contact a helpline such as Butterfly's or the KidsHelpline. It can be challenging for a young person to express how they feel but it's important that they learn early that talking helps and there is always someone who will listen.



#### Butterfly National Helpline

provides free and confidential support Australia-wide, to anyone experiencing body image or eating concerns.

8am-Midnight (AEST),  
7 days a week.

Phone, webchat or email  
(1800 33 4673)

[www.butterflynationalhelpline.org.au](http://www.butterflynationalhelpline.org.au)

# Guidelines for early intervention

There's **no right or wrong way** to approach someone with an eating disorder, and different approaches will work for different people at different times. There are better ways to approach someone, use these steps as a guide.

## 1. BE INFORMED

The most useful thing to do before you approach your child is to be prepared and learn as much as you can about eating disorders.

The Butterfly [website](#) is a great place to start.

You can also call the [Butterfly National Helpline](#) to speak to a trained professional about how you might go about raising your concerns.

## 2. PLAN AHEAD

Read through the 'What to avoid tips'. Choose a place that is private, comfortable and away from the rest of the family. Raise concerns away from mealtimes or when either of you are angry, emotional or frustrated.

## 3. TALK CALMLY

Try to be open, honest, non-judgmental, respectful and kind. Use 'I' statements rather than 'you' statements. "I am worried about you because...." as opposed to, "You are making me worried".

Reassure them that your concern comes from a place of love and wanting them to be healthy and happy.

## 4. PREPARE FOR A RANGE OF REACTIONS

It's unlikely the problem will be resolved in one conversation or that any advice will be acted upon immediately, even if they asked for it.

**i** The eating disorder mindset can get defensive if 'found out'. There are a range of reasons this may happen, so try not to take a negative reaction personally. Leave it and try again at another time.

**Positive reactions:** Your teen might feel relief that the problem has been acknowledged and that you've noticed they are not coping.

**Negative reactions:** Your teen may be defensive, angry, tearful or aggressive. It's important to stay calm and avoid arguing. Try repeating your concerns and provide assurance you are there to support them and that as a parent you need to ensure they are safe and healthy.

## 5. SEEK PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

Acting sooner rather than later is better!

If you're not sure something is 'serious' enough or if your teen is not open to acknowledging they are struggling (yet!), do not let this stop you from speaking to a health professional or seeking support.

**i** If you are not comfortable with initial professional advice, seek further professional opinions.

To help you have a more positive and productive conversation with a health professional or even the Butterfly National Helpline this [interactive website](#) can help you work through your concerns, [www.feedyourinstinct.com.au](http://www.feedyourinstinct.com.au).

## 6. PRACTICE SELF-CARE



Supporting someone who is experiencing body image and eating problems can be very challenging. It can also be challenging for your every member of your family. Do your best to take care of yourself too, in ways that work for you.

Eating Disorders Families Australia offer a range of resources and support groups to help families experiencing eating disorders. [www.edfa.org.au](http://www.edfa.org.au)

Knowing what to *say* to someone you love can be *tricky*.

### Things to help start a conversation:

- "I've been worried about you lately"
- "You seem a bit preoccupied at the moment"
- "How have you been feeling?"
- "I've noticed that (insert general observations, rather than specific details). What's going on?"

### Positive ways to respond:

- If your teen opens-up, thank them for sharing; it can be a very hard step to take. Acknowledge their feelings and repeat back what they have said to show you understand.
- "What I am hearing is..."
- "So, you said you are feeling (insert emotion etc.), is that right?" and "Thank-you for sharing that with me"

### Positive ways to close a conversation:

- Explain that their behaviours may indicate there is a problem that needs professional help.
- Offer to help them get support and ask them what they would like to happen next.
- "It sounds like things are hard for you right now. I'm here for you and want to help. I think some professional help might be useful. What would you like to do now?"

### Things to avoid saying and/or doing:

- Offering simple solutions "Just eat."
- Interrupting, disagreeing or blaming – "You are choosing to do this to yourself."
- Using emotive statements - "Look at what you are doing to me/our family."
- Forcing a conversation if it's not going well. It's better to try again later.
- Getting into details about food and weight (these are symptoms, not the problem) or diagnosing. Focus on their health, feelings and behaviours.
- Expressing anger if they are not responding.
- Commenting on their body or weight.
- Overwhelming them with information about diagnosis or treatment. Focus on empathy and connection. Take it a step at a time.

### Need to talk through concerns? Butterfly National Helpline

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