

Early intervention for eating disorders: How to start the conversation

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.

Early intervention can reduce the severity and duration of eating disorders and can make a full recovery more likely. Everyone can play a role in taking action early and having a conversation is a great way to start.

Be prepared

It's not always easy to detect who may have an eating disorder – they come in all shapes and sizes and don't have a "look". Before you approach a person, learn what you can about eating disorders, treatment options and recovery. The more you understand, the more you'll be able to help the person you are supporting.

The best weapon against an eating disorder is education and awareness of the warning signs.
– Madi, 31, ACT

Be prepared for a negative or emotional response, the person might be fearful, ashamed or not recognise there is cause for concern.

How to start a conversation

Choose a calm, quiet and safe environment, not during meal times or when the person is stressed or anxious.

Use 'I' statements, not 'you' statements to avoid placing the blame on the individual

- "I've been worried about you lately"
- "I've noticed you've been a bit preoccupied lately..."

Don't focus solely on food or their weight

- Focus on your concern for their health and how they are feeling and behaving.
- "I've noticed that you've been withdrawn and upset lately. I'm worried about XYZ behaviour - What's going on?"

People not commenting on my body changing would've helped. – Georgina, 27, VIC

Be compassionate

- Discuss your concerns with the person in an open and honest way, aiming to be non-judgmental, respectful and kind.
- Acknowledge their feelings and repeat back what they have said to show you understand. "What I am hearing is...." "I understand you are feeling (insert emotion), is that right?" and "Thank you for sharing that with me"
- Let them know you are not trying to fix their behaviours or get them to change immediately but explain their behaviours may indicate there is problem that needs professional help.

Always ensure the individual feels in control of their choices they can make; validating them is essential for effective support.
– Samantha, 47, WA

Positive ways to close a conversation

Offer advice about support, where to find it and offer to help them. – Sally, 52, VIC

- 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?"
- You might need to try more than once – be patient but persistent; let them know you aren't going to stop caring and you just want to help them be happy and healthy.

Things to avoid saying and/or doing:

- Offering simple solutions "Just eat."
- Interrupting, disagreeing or blaming, or using "you" statements – "You are choosing to do this to yourself," "You are being unreasonable".
- 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 one step at a time.

It is never advised to 'watch and wait'. If you or someone you know has concerns about disordered eating it is important to seek help immediately. Know the signs. Act early.

Reach out to Butterfly's National Helpline on **1800 ED HOPE** (1800 33 4673), chat online or email support@butterfly.org.au Available 7 days a week, 8am-midnight (AEST).

Eating Disorders Victoria Helpline on **1300 550 23**

Eating Disorders Families Australia on **1300 195 626**

In a crisis? Call Lifeline on **13 11 14** or **000** in an emergency.