

Through Thick and Thin

Supporting a Loved One with an Eating Disorder

Eating disorders are extremely complex psychological problems that can affect women and men of all ages. While many people believe eating disorders are the product of a society that idealizes thinness, the cause is unclear. We do know that factors such as family issues and genetic traits may make a person more vulnerable to develop an eating disorder.

Understanding Eating Disorders

Eating disorders are usually connected with strong feelings of depression and low self-esteem. It's unclear whether these emotions are causes or results of the disorder. People with eating disorders tend to find comfort or security in their disorder. Often the preoccupation with food helps them cope with emotional issues or personal problems.

Recognizing Warning Signs

These warning signs can help you determine if someone you know may be developing an eating disorder. Symptoms of an eating disorder are subtle, and not every person who suffers from an eating disorder will show all the signs. Also, people can have some of these behaviors without developing an eating disorder.

Signs of Anorexia:

- Refusal to eat
- Excessive or continuous dieting
- Extreme weight loss
- Intense fear of gaining weight
- Denial of hunger
- Insistence on eating alone
- Increased sensitivity to cold
- Hair loss on the scalp accompanied by excessive facial or body hair
- Withdrawal from friends and family

Signs of Bulimia:

- Increased preoccupation with food
- Binge eating
- Vomiting after eating
- Excessive use of laxatives
- Increased tiredness, irritability or apathy
- Tooth damage
- Chronic sore throat
- Difficulty with breathing or swallowing
- Dehydration

Signs of Binge Eating:

- Eats rapidly or with a lack of control
- Eats large amounts of food without being hungry, and to the point of being uncomfortable or in pain
- Tends to eat late at night
- Hides or hoards food in secret (especially junk food)
- Steals food (or money to buy food)
- Feels disgusted or ashamed when overeating
- Avoids social situations, especially those involving food

The Danger of Eating Disorders

Abnormal eating habits can threaten health and even life. The most common types of eating disorders are:

Anorexia (Anorexia Nervosa). Individuals believe they're fat even when they're dangerously thin and restrict their eating dramatically, sometimes to the point of starvation.

Bulimia (Bulimia Nervosa). Individuals eat excessive amounts, then purge by vomiting or using laxatives.

Binge Eating is another potentially dangerous eating disorder. These people have frequent bouts of out-of-control eating, often when they're alone.

Eating disorders usually don't go away on their own. In fact, the National Institute of Mental Health estimates that one in ten anorexia cases ends in death from starvation, suicide or medical complications.¹ It's important to get help if you or a family member may have an eating disorder.

Things You Can Do To Help

Educate Yourself

Learn about the signs, symptoms and causes of eating disorders. This will help you support your friend or loved one, and you'll have a better idea of what to expect during the treatment process.

Encourage Your Friend to Seek Treatment

If you believe that a friend or loved one may have an eating disorder, talk to that person about your concern and encourage him or her to seek professional help. Your friend or loved one may become embarrassed, ashamed or upset. Be sensitive and emphasize that you're talking about the issue because you care about the person's well-being.

People with eating disorders sometimes go to extreme measures to hide their disorder and deny they have a problem. It helps to cite specific behaviors you've noticed that led you to be concerned.

Know Your Limitations

Your friend or family member has to make the decision to help himself or herself; you cannot force any person to undergo treatment, even if the person is under 18. Although parents or guardians may have the authority to force a minor to seek help, this does not guarantee that the minor will cooperate.

This doesn't mean you should give up at the first refusal. It may take a great deal of encouragement before people admit they have a problem and seek help. Follow up with further discussions. Let the person know you're still concerned.

Help Them Seek Help

It's a big step for a person with an eating disorder to reach out and get assistance. You can make it easier by offering to help find the professional treatment the person needs.

Since eating disorders are psychological problems that cause serious physical damage, your friend or family member will need both medical and mental health care. It's important to find a doctor and therapist who specialize in eating disorders. Several eating disorder organizations — including the American Anorexia/Bulimia Association and the National Eating Disorders Organization — can help you find the right professional and refer you to support groups.

Continue Giving Support

Treatment for an eating disorder can be a difficult, long-term process —involving hard work by the affected person, friends and family. Most people in recovery experience many emotional ups and downs along the way. The person will need your love, care and understanding more than ever. Keep in touch, check how things are going, and continue to give encouragement and support.

Take Care of Yourself

An eating disorder impacts everyone who cares about the person who is suffering. It's easy to get caught up in your friend or loved one's situation, and it's common to feel frustrated, depressed or anxious. It's important to acknowledge your own feelings and take steps to ensure your emotional well-being.

Coping with eating disorders isn't always easy. But you don't have to go it alone. We're here to help. Call or log on any time for help with any of life's challenges.

Resources

ASAP offers confidential, cost-free assessment, counseling, consultation and referral services to all UCDHS faculty and staff and their family members. Whether the problem is work-related, personal, career or relationship focused, ASAP can assist you in evaluating and resolving the problem. Call us at 916-734-2727.

Location; 2730 Stockton Blvd., Suite 2100, Sacramento, CA 95817.

<http://www.ucdmc.ucdavis.edu/hr/hrdepts/asap/>

¹ American Psychological Association. "Eating Disorders." <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/eating.aspx>. Accessed July 22, 2010.
http://www.nmha.org/files/Mental_Health_America_Attitudinal_Survey_-_Executive_Summary.pdf. Accessed October 15, 2010.