How to Help a Friend with Eating and Body Image Issues

If you are reading this handout, chances are you are concerned about the eating habits, weight, or body image of someone you care about. We understand that this can be a very difficult and scary time for you. Let us assure you that you are doing a great thing by looking for more information! This list may not tell you everything you need to know about what to do in your specific situation, but it will give you some helpful ideas on what to do to help your friend.

Learn as much as you can about eating disorders. Read books, articles, and brochures.

Know the differences between facts and myths about weight, nutrition, and exercise. Knowing the facts will help you reason against any inaccurate ideas that your friend may be using as excuses to maintain their disordered eating patterns.

Be honest. Talk openly and honestly about your concerns with the person who is struggling with eating or body image problems. Avoiding it or ignoring it won't help!

Be caring, but be firm. Caring about your friend does not mean being manipulated by them. Your friend must be responsible for their actions and the consequences of those actions. Avoid making rules, promises, or expectations that you cannot or will not uphold. For example, "I promise not to tell anyone." Or, "If you do this one more time I'll never talk to you again."

Compliment your friend's wonderful personality, successes, or accomplishments. Remind your friend that "true beauty" is not simply skin deep.

Be a good role model in regard to sensible eating, exercise, and self-acceptance.

Tell someone. It may seem difficult to know when, if at all, to tell someone else about your concerns. Addressing body image or eating problems in their beginning stages offers your friend the best chance for working through these issues and becoming healthy again. Don't wait until the situation is so severe that your friend's life is in danger. Your friend needs as much support and understanding as possible.

Remember that you cannot force someone to seek help, change their habits, or adjust their attitudes. You will make important progress in honestly sharing your concerns, providing support, and knowing where to go for more information! People struggling with anorexia, bulimia, or binge eating disorder do need professional help. There is help available and there is hope!

For more information, contact the National Eating Disorders Association at 603 Stewart St., Suite 803, Seattle, WA 98101
Information and Referral Helpline: 800-931-2237 or www.NationalEatingDisorders.org
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