Disordered eating: Helping a friend

If you have noticed a friend is struggling with eating concerns, you are already a great friend just for paying attention. You now have the opportunity to take the next steps to help your friend and offer support. Because eating concerns can involve serious physical and emotional risks, it is important to think about the best way to approach your friend. The following list incorporates tips, ideas, and resources that have helped others approach this difficult but important conversation. Sharing your concerns shows that you care, and often friends are relieved to know that they are not alone.

You can learn about the danger signs of an eating disorder at http://www.something-fishy.org. If you would like to discuss your concerns further, please consider making an appointment at CAPS. You can also talk to your PHE, RA, RD, a Bridge counselor, or Wellness and Health Promotion Services (HPS). We are here to help!

Here are some tips for sharing your concerns:

**Step One: Plan an effective approach**
- One or two caring individuals should approach the person you are concerned about. Close, trusted friends are usually best.
- These individual(s) should convey a sensible attitude concerning weight-related issues and a healthy, realistic approach to eating and exercise.
- Establish a private, safe environment.
- Consider rehearsing how to approach the subject.
- Encourage the person to seek help with a trained health professional.

**Step Two: During the conversation**

**Effective strategies**
- Express your concerns in a straightforward yet caring manner. Share two or three specific examples or times when you felt afraid or uneasy. Use an “I” message format:
  - **Example:** “I noticed you’ve been avoiding meals with us lately. I wonder if we could talk about that?”
  - **Example:** “I feel concerned about the weight you’ve lost this past quarter. I was hoping we could talk about this.”
  - **Example:** “I noticed you’ve been dieting for a long time now. Is it possible for us to discuss this?”
- Give the person time to talk and encourage him/her to verbalize feelings. Continue the discussion by asking clarifying questions and accepting responses in a non-judgmental manner.
- Be prepared for strong feelings or reactions from the person (i.e., denial, anger, confusion).
• Toward the end of the discussion, provide information and resources for self-assessment, counseling, or treatment, such as the Stanford Healthy Body Image Program or CAPs. Offer to come along and wait during the first appointment.
• Close the discussion by letting him/her know you are willing to talk again.
  ▪ Example: “I know you feel things are OK, but that will not change my concerns. I hope we can talk again about this because I care about you and your health.”

Less effective strategies
• Debating about food eaten or not eaten, or calories consumed. Looking for reasons that contributed to the development an eating disorder. Remember—your primary purpose is to be supportive and to encourage the person to seek further help.
• Offering advice or personal opinions.
• Engaging in an argument or power struggle if your friend denies the situation.
• Offering simplistic solutions (e.g., “Why don’t you just eat?”).
• Making “you” statements (e.g., “You have to eat something.”).
• Offering subjective opinions like, “You’re getting too skinny.” Instead, put your observations in terms of health: “I am worried because you seem preoccupied and don’t have much energy lately.”

Step Three: Following up
Effective strategies
• If the person declines your request to seek help, remind yourself that you have done all it is reasonable for you to do. You made important progress in honestly sharing your concerns, providing support, and offering available information and resources.
• Eating disorders are usually not emergency situations. However, if the person is in medical danger (e.g., vomits daily) and/or at risk for suicide, contact help immediately at Vaden Medical Services at 650-498-2336.

Less effective strategies
• Taking it personally if your friend seems uncomfortable around you. She or he is in the beginning stages of healing and might feel exposed. Continue to be supportive by offering to talk and suggesting resources.