

## New England Eating Disorders Program (NEED)

50 Moody St., Saco, ME 04072  
Intake Line: (207) 294-4522

### HOW TO SUPPORT A LOVED ONE WITH AN EATING DISORDER

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#### If I have concerns, should I say something?

Deciding whether to talk to a loved one about potential eating disorder symptoms can often lead to anxiety. At times, it may seem easier to avoid talking about the problem and to hope that symptoms are not as significant as feared. However, delaying support to someone that you are concerned about can have detrimental effects. **Evidence shows that the earlier a person with an eating disorder receives treatment, the better the outcome.** In this regard, we recommend that if you are concerned someone may have an eating disorder, thoughtfully express your concerns using the considerations outlined below.

#### Is talking about an eating disorder going to make it worse?

**There is no evidence to say that openly talking about eating disorder symptoms worsens the disorder.** In fact, many evidence-based treatment protocols work directly to eliminate secrecy related to the disorder and help an individual to communicate more openly, which in turn helps to better confront the illness. Individuals with eating disorders often report that they wondered when someone would notice their behaviors and felt relieved when someone finally expressed concern.

#### What should I consider before talking to someone?

- Remember that for someone who has never talked about their illness before, it can be a very difficult process resulting in a myriad of emotions- anxiety, relief, anger, sadness, surprise, guilt, and shame. Depending on the individual, these feelings can be expressed in a variety of ways. Consider that an upsetting reaction to your support may occur. This response is unlikely related to you or your communication, but perhaps the individual's willingness to confront their behaviors at the time.
- Your loved one may not be able to, or want to, recognize the severity of their behaviors and this can sometimes feel like defensiveness or denial. An individual's eating disorder can impact judgment, insight, and awareness (due to the effects on the brain and the nature of the illness) which can cause someone to struggle to understand the severity of their illness. **Even if a conversation is met with resistance, it doesn't mean that it didn't need to happen.**
- Consider educating yourself before talking with your loved one. Try reviewing some of the materials on the New England Eating Disorders Program (NEED) at Sweetser's website to better understand the different types of eating disorders, signs and symptoms, and risk factors. Having some basic knowledge and information to better understand your concerns can be very useful. That said, you do not need to be an expert in eating disorders to offer support to your loved one. Remember that you are an expert in your own thoughts and feelings and your relationship to your loved one.
- Be thoughtful about the environment that you choose to start the conversation. Find a low-stress time and space where you can have a private talk, preferably in a 1:1 format.

### What should I say and how should I say it?

- Remain calm, patient, and allow enough time.
- Try to talk from your own perspective and try using “I” statements.
- Focus on behaviors you are noticing that seem to be impacting your loved one’s experiences and/or your relationship with your loved one. Explain calmly the reasons why you are concerned. For example, “It worries me to see you exercising instead of spending time with your friends and I’m concerned about how much stress you seem to be under.”
- Try focusing on consequences from eating disorder behaviors that you have noticed (e.g., isolation, withdrawal, low energy, avoidance of activities that were previously enjoyed, mood shifts, difficulty concentrating).
- Remind your loved one of the things that you love about them and what you miss about them as you have noticed concerning behaviors (e.g., “Since you have stopped eating dinner with the family, I miss being able to hear about the exciting things that happen in your day and having focused time with you during our hectic weeks.”)
- Ask the person what they think they need. Remember that no one can change their behavior unless they want to. Ask if they want to change, what their reasoning is for wanting to change, and reflect back what you hear.
- Actively listen- acknowledge thoughts and feelings and recognize how difficult it is to talk about an eating disorder.
- Ask them how you can be a support person and let them know that you are available to listen, unconditionally. Approach the situation with concern and try to avoid forceful direction about what needs to happen.
- Offer help- People with eating disorders are often afraid to ask for help, so offer it!
- If needed, provide opportunities of where to access professional help and who to talk to.
- Introduce the idea of having a follow-up conversation.

### What should I avoid saying?

- Avoid focusing on weight. Focusing on weight could be misconstrued by someone with negative body image as weight being the most important part of themselves.
- Do not use words to describe someone’s body. People with eating disorders often over-focus on the way their body looks. Even reassuring the person they “look beautiful” places emphasis on the importance of appearance and therefore can feed into their eating disorder.
- Do not belittle one’s illness or make the solution seem easy. Depending on the severity of one’s illness, recovery from an eating disorder can sometimes be a long, challenging road.
- Do not blame the person by using phrases like, “You’re hurting yourself.” Avoid criticizing or shaming.

### What do I do if I am confronted with resistance?

- Parents are advised to seek quick medical attention if noticing signs of an eating disorder in one’s child. We know that early intervention is always best; however, critically important for children and adolescents. **Parents are encouraged to take the lead in finding eating disorder specialists for their child’s care.** Though this can at times be uncomfortable for a child, we know that working to reverse symptoms as soon as possible is critical and parental management of treatment can help to achieve this.
- If you are supporting a loved one who is an adult, try planning to revisit your conversation at a later date and leave the conversation open. Continue to educate yourself about eating disorders. Try reaching out for support yourself to learn how best to offer recovery-oriented support. Try to connect with other support people of your loved one to consider how best to approach the situation.

### What resources can I give?

The first step in receiving help would be finding a reputable, eating disorder-specialized provider in your area. At NEED, we offer free, confidential telephone eating disorder assessments. This intake call is an opportunity to ask confidential questions and learn more about options for effective treatment. Our treatment options include a multidisciplinary range of services by eating disorder experts. **For more information, please call 207-294-4522.**