



Bulimia Anorexia Nervosa Association  
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## **APPROACHING SOMEONE YOU SUSPECT HAS AN EATING DISORDER**

It is often difficult to understand why someone is experiencing an eating disorder or has weight preoccupation. Many people believe that eating disorders are only about food and weight, but in reality, these are just the symptoms/coping strategies to deal with the underlying problems. Below is a list of helpful hints to keep in mind when approaching someone you suspect has an eating disorder.

1. Gather information and educate yourself on eating disorders.
2. Avoid talking about food and weight.
3. Assure them by saying that a) they are not alone, and b) that you love them and c) that you want to help in any way that you can without infringing on their rights, and d) respect their need for privacy.
4. Encourage them to seek help from a therapist, and get medical help.
5. Never try to force them to eat or pressure them to make changes.
6. Do not comment on weight or appearances because comments may be taken the wrong way.
7. Do not blame the individual, and do not get angry, recovery takes time, be patient.
8. Make mealtimes pleasant and enjoyable.
9. Be a friend and actively listen by reflecting back their needs and concerns.
10. Do not take on the role of a therapist. It's important to remember that when you first approach the person you suspect has an eating disorder, they may react with anger or denial. Be supportive by letting them know that you will be there for them if they need to talk. In cases where the person has been severely restricting food, or is bingeing/purging several times a day, and the individual's health is in extreme danger, you could contact their doctor or a clinical therapist at BANA.

In a case of extreme emergency bring the person directly to a hospital. No matter how much you want to help, remember that only they can make the decision to get help. It is their responsibility to continue with their own process of recovery. Forcing them to recover can only hinder their recovery process.

Below is a list of statements that should never be made to a person suffering from an eating disorder because these statements may jeopardize their own strength and progress toward recovery.

**The Ontario Provincial Network of  
Eating Disorder Service Providers**



1. *"Just sit down and eat like a normal person."* If only it were that easy. Remind yourself that there are deeper emotional issues that may be preventing them from eating properly.
2. *"Why are you doing this to me?"* They are doing it to themselves. A comment like that would only cause more guilt and make them feel worse about themselves.
3. *"You've put on weight, you look great!"* They don't hear "you look great", they only hear "you've put on weight" leading them to believe that they are fat.
4. *"Are you making any progress?"* A comment like that doesn't recognize the process and that progress takes time.
5. *"I'll help to fatten you up!"* The words "fatten you up" are very terrifying to a person with an eating disorder. Comments like this can be very damaging.
6. *"Are you keeping anything down?"* or *"When was the last time you puked?"* The act of purging can leave the person with feelings of guilt and shame. Having someone ask this question can cause them to re-experience those feelings and leave them feeling ashamed for having a problem.
7. *"You look terrible."* Avoid commenting on the person's appearance. The person is already obsessed with body image.
8. *"You are ruining our family."* Comments like this only cause the person more guilt. It will not motivate them to change, instead, it may drive them into deeper isolation.
9. *"What have you eaten today?"* Avoid comments about food. Instead, ask about their feelings and their life.
10. *"If you think you are fat, you must think that I'm obese!"* A disturbed body image is a key feature of Anorexia Nervosa. Avoid commenting on body image.
11. *"Go ahead and have a drink or eat that. You'll just go and throw it up anyway, so what does it matter?"*  
Be encouraging about trying new things. Avoid talking about purging.
12. *"I wish I had that problem."* or *"I wish I could be anorexic for a day."* Everyday is a struggle with eating. Recognize the tremendous pain in trying to overcome it. This will increase the expression of feelings.
13. *"For someone with an eating disorder- you're sure pigging out today."* Avoid judging the person. Recognize the struggle not the food.
14. *"You look so healthy, you were always so thin before."* They may in fact be looking better and looking much healthier, but it is best not to comment on a person's appearance. Focus on the feelings. Make appearance secondary.  
Someone with an eating disorder has the best chance for recovery when they are surrounded by people who are loving and supportive.

Recovery takes time and is hard work, but with treatment, which could include individual, group and family therapy, support groups, medical and nutritional counselling, eating disorders can be overcome.

It is recommended that families get support for themselves because knowing someone who has an eating disorder can be frustrating and emotionally exhausting. Seeking the help of a therapist or a support group may help you through this difficult time.

Visit BANA's Digital Library for  
Downloadable Resources on Body  
Image, Self-Esteem and Eating Disorders

