

How to help a student who may be struggling with an eating disorder

It can be worrisome to believe that a friend, roommate or classmate may be experiencing an eating disorder. It is important to speak with the student about your concerns as soon as you are able in order to offer support and let the student know that you care. The following are some suggestions for beginning a conversation.

Set aside time to talk one on one. Group interventions are less likely to be helpful so consider talking individually. Ideally, the conversation should take place when you are clear-headed and have privacy.

Make it a caring confrontation, express concern and a desire to help. This student is likely struggling and needs your empathy and understanding. Share your fears about the student's physical and psychological health.

Communicate your concerns clearly. Using “I” statements, discuss specific phrases and behaviors of the student. Examples are “I’ve noticed that you’ve lost a lot of weight and I am worried” and “I’ve noticed that you only talk about weight loss and calories anymore.”

Avoid conflicts or battles. If the student denies having an eating disorder, insisting on your concerns will not likely be helpful. Keep away from the more accusatory “you” statements which may lead the student to become defensive.

Steer clear of placing shame or guilt on the student. Do not shame the student into admitting to the eating disorder. Avoid the use of the term eating disorder unless the student acknowledges the diagnosis as an issue.

Assist the student in getting help. Provide different options including the Counseling Center, Dowell Health Center and off campus treatment providers such as the [Center for Eating Disorders](http://CenterforEatingDisorders.org) (eatingdisorder.org). The student may express a willingness to be seen for one evaluation or appointment. View this as a positive first step.

Help the student make appointments and consider walking with him or her to appointments.

Express your continued support regardless of whether your friend admits to have an eating disorder. Check in regularly to provide additional support and encouragement.

If you are concerned for the student’s safety, seek out assistance from university staff immediately. If you live on campus, consider speaking with your RA or another Housing staff member. Any student may contact the Counseling Center for help determining next steps.

Seek out your own support. Consult with family, friends and university professionals.

For more information, check out [National Eating Disorders Association](http://Nationaleatingdisorders.org) (nationaleatingdisorders.org)