



## How To Talk To A Friend With An Eating Disorder, According To An Expert

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Eating disorders don't discriminate. They can affect anyone — man or woman; black or white; gay or straight; seven years old or 70. They come in many different forms, and for many, many different reasons. Talking to someone with an eating disorder can be difficult to navigate, but the one thing that all people struggling with eating disorders have in common is the love and support of their friends and family to get them through it.

Given the diversity of types of eating disorders and people struggling with them, there is no one surefire way to help a friend or loved one, but there are certain ways to handle the conversation that help make it more effective.

Laura Cipullo, President of the New York Chapter of The International Association for Eating Disorder Professionals spoke to Bustle in a telephone interview about how to go about confronting a friend you believe is struggling with an eating disorder in a productive and compassionate way. She explains the importance of understanding what, exactly an eating disorder *is*, as a means of better helping a loved one.

"Food is everywhere, and we have to make so many food decisions, so if you don't have coping skills or tools to deal with the stress of growing up and the stress of the modern world, one thing that you can manage is through your body and through food," says Cipullo. "Someone who is restricting, for example, if they

can't use their words to describe their pain or suffering, many times they use their body to express it."

Cipullo offers a few tips on how to talk to a friend with an eating disorder and let them know you're here to help.

### **1. Do Your Research**

Before going into the conversation with your friend, do some research about eating disorders so that you can get a better sense of what your friend is going through.

"It's nice to have somebody set up with some background information so they can be sensitive," says Cipullo. You can find educational resources through the [National Eating Disorder Association](#), as well as more tips on how to help a friend who is struggling.

### **2. Don't Make It About Food**

This is, far and away, the *most* important thing to keep in mind when talking to a friend with an eating disorder. Instead of making the conversation about weight, focus on the person's behavior and mood, instead. "Food isn't truly the issue, it's the secondary issue," says Cipullo. "The primary issue is something else — maybe there's anxiety, or depression, or some sort of trauma underlying."

Frame the discussion by saying something along the lines of "I've noticed your mood changing," or "I've noticed you've seemed less happy," or even "I've noticed you've seem uncomfortable around food," instead of saying something about their weight or eating habits, which could cause them to get defensive.

### **3. Consult Your Other Friends**

Having a conversation like this is *never* going to be easy, but it may be helpful to go into it with one or two of the person's other best friends. If they are confronted by a few people, they can't be defensive that it's a personal attack. "The person that's struggling can't say 'Oh they're being oversensitive' or 'They're making it up' or 'They're just jealous of my weight.'" If a couple of their close friends express

their concerns together in a loving, productive way, it will ultimately help move past defensiveness or denial and aid them on the road to recovery.

#### **4. Pick The Right Time**

Do *not* try to have this conversation around a meal. “A meal is already so loaded and emotional for a person,” says Cipullo. Instead, schedule a quiet time (where there will be no issue of food or eating) to have your heart to heart.

#### **5. Go Into It With Compassion, Not Anger**

When a loved one is struggling with an eating disorder, it’s not uncommon that people become frustrated with them. “Friends get angry that the person isn’t taking care of themselves or is making everybody else feel uncomfortable, or that the person isn’t sharing what’s going on,” says Cipullo. When confronting your friend, cast these angry or irritated feelings aside in favor of love and compassion. The conversation will be much more productive.

#### **6. Ask “How Can I Support You?” & “What Can I Do To Help?”**

At the beginning, your friend may not know how to answer this. When they’re ready, though, it’s important that you’re there to listen. They may say something along the lines of, “give me a hug,” “don’t talk about food in X way,” or “don’t talk about my body in that way.” Just be there to listen to your friend — when he or she is ready, they’ll tell you what they need, according to Cipullo.

#### **7. Encourage Them To Talk To Someone With Experience**

The goal of the conversation, according to Cipullo, should be to encourage your friend to talk to a professional. As much as you want to help your friend, no matter how much pre-research you’ve done before the conversation they will inevitably need more help than what you’re able to give them.

#### **8. Help Them Find An Expert**

There are countless resources for people struggling with eating disorders. When he or she is ready, your friend may choose to start their recovery with either a

dietitian, a nutritionist, or a therapist. [The National Eating Disorder Association](#), [The International Organization of Eating Disorder Professionals](#), and [The Binge Eating Disorder Association](#) all offer exhaustive lists of experts that specialize in all different kinds of eating issues.

## **9. Let Them Know That Above All Else, You're There For Them**

Recovering from an eating disorder doesn't happen overnight; it takes a lot of time, and a lot of work and dedication from both the person who's struggling and his or her loved ones. Make sure your friend knows that no matter what, you're there for them— more than anything, that's really what matters.

Being there for friends who are dealing with something you may not be familiar with may seem overwhelming, but know that your support for them is what counts at the end of the day, and it probably means more to them than you can know.