



# How To Help a Friend

If you are reading this, chances are that you are worried about someone who might have an eating disorder. You might be worried about a friend at school, or possibly a sister or brother. Maybe you have seen your friend throw away food instead of eating. Maybe you have seen your friend vomit on purpose or take laxatives or diet pills. Perhaps your friend seems sad or complains about being fat or feeling worthless. This information can help you approach a friend who may need your help.

## **A person who is not eating enough may need help**

Most of us grow up hearing about family members and friends who are trying to lose weight, and we do not think much about it. However, **some people go too far**. Being obsessed with body fat or losing weight can be a sign of stress or depression. People who develop eating disorders, such as anorexia or bulimia, often remember that their problems started when they began dieting.

- ◆ People who have **anorexia** eat very little even though they are thin. They have an intense fear of body fat and weight gain.
- ◆ People with **bulimia** will get rid of food that they have just eaten by vomiting or taking laxatives or diuretics (water pills). They also have a fear of body fat even though their size or weight may be normal for them.
- ◆ **Overexercising** is when someone feels driven to exercise as a way to burn calories from food that she or he has just eaten. People with anorexia or bulimia may overexercise.

“When I was 12, a group of friends and I decided to go on diets. Sounds innocent, but I got carried away. After 3 months, long after my friends quit their diets, I still would not eat very much. What’s so scary is how good I thought I looked. At my worst I was always tired, freezing, and had no energy. I couldn’t concentrate, and my hair began to fall out. I withdrew from my friends, and I couldn’t care less about guys. Eventually, my parents brought me to a psychologist. With help I am maintaining my new, healthy outlook on nutrition and fitness.”

—Dawn Carrow, Miss Vermont Teen USA 1998  
(Teen magazine, February 1999)

## **A person who is eating too much may need help**

Your friend may need help if she or he is binge eating. **Binge eating** means eating large amounts of food in a short period of time, usually alone, without being able to stop when full. People with binge eating disorder do not try to get rid of the food they have eaten.

We all overeat sometimes—at parties, on holidays, or when we eat a favorite food. Children and teens may eat a lot because they are growing and are very hungry. But your friend may have a problem if she or he feels out of control when overeating. People with binge eating disorder may feel disgusted with themselves or feel depressed or very guilty after overeating.



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## **Your friend's health may be in danger**

- ◆ Not eating enough can make someone feel cold, tired, moody, or grumpy. Not eating can cause dry hair and skin, interfere with a girl's menstrual cycle, and weaken young people's bones.
- ◆ Vomiting can damage your throat and teeth, and using laxatives can hurt your intestines and other parts of your body.
- ◆ Binge eating can lead to obesity or being overweight.

## **If you are concerned about your friend, don't keep your suspicions to yourself**

**In a calm and caring way, tell your friend what you saw or heard.** Use "I" statements, and let your friend know that you are concerned. Here are some suggestions:

- ◆ "I'm worried about you because you haven't eaten lunch this week."
- ◆ "I heard you talking about taking laxatives . . . (or diet pills) and that scares me."
- ◆ "Are you O.K.? Were you vomiting after lunch? I am concerned about you."

**Listen carefully to what your friend says.** Think about how your friend might feel. Your friend might feel ashamed or scared. Your friend may feel unimportant or think that life doesn't matter. Feeling out of control also is common. Not eating or eating too much may be your friend's way of coping with problems at home or at school.

**What if they get mad or deny it?** It is very common for people with problems to say that there is nothing wrong. They might beg you not to tell. Or they may promise they won't do it anymore. Your friend may get angry because of fear, shame, or other strong emotions.

## **Tell your friend that you want to help**

What your friend is doing is scary and unhealthy. Tell your friend that you care and that you want her or him

to get help. Encourage your friend to talk to a grownup. Say you would be willing to go along to provide support.

Tell your friend that you want to help and don't want to keep your concern a secret. Your friend's health might be in danger. You may decide to tell your friend that you want to talk to a grownup about it.

## **Tell a grownup about your concern**

Being worried about your friend and wanting to help is a good thing. Consider telling your parents or your friend's parents, a teacher, or the school nurse or counselor what you know. Tell someone who will understand and can get help for your friend. It is not "tattling" or "ratting" on your friend if you are worried about her or his health.

**Here are some suggestions of what to say:**

- ◆ "I'm worried about \_\_\_ because I saw her (him) throw up on purpose/take a laxative/talk about taking diet pills/throw away her (his) lunch."
- ◆ "I'm concerned about \_\_\_ because she (he) always complains about being too fat/seems so sad/says she (he) never can do anything right."

## **You are doing the right thing!**

Being healthy means accepting and nourishing your body. Someone who is not eating or eating too much may need help.

You can't solve your friend's problems, but you can help. Honestly share your concerns and tell a grownup so your friend can get professional help if needed.

Knowing what your friend is doing and telling someone about it might be stressful for you. You might decide to talk to someone, such as a counselor, about your experience with trying to help your friend.

You are doing the right thing. Others will be glad to know and want to help you as well.