

Helping Someone With an Eating Disorder

By Mary Mitchell

Sooner or later just about everyone will encounter a colleague or friend with an eating disorder. Between five and 10 million people in the United States alone suffer from compulsive eating, anorexia or bulimia, and most of them are women.

It's tough sitting across the table from someone who's not eating, or someone who is eating too much. You know the problem is interfering with the person's health and general wellbeing. Should you say something, or mind your own business?

Some Advice From The Caron Foundation

"It is appropriate to express your concern, and to do so in a way that will let them hear you," says Susan Merle Gordon, director of research at the Caron Foundation, a nationally recognized addiction treatment center.

"Eating disorders aren't about food. They're about how a person feels about herself," Gordon says. People with eating disorders focus on their appearance, instead of focusing on the basis for their condition.

Gordon offers this advice on reaching out to someone with an eating disorder:

- To comment on the person's appearance, eating, or food-related behavior is to risk losing a friend, or at least shutting the door to further communication. Compulsive eaters, because they are overweight, frequently endure extraordinarily rude comments from strangers; your comments about eating may add to the pain. If you express concern to an anorexic about how thin she is, her reaction will be, "You're just jealous."
- If you comment to a bulimic on her vomiting and laxative use to control her weight, she may deny it because she is ashamed of her behavior. Express your concern without focusing on appearance or what she's eating. You can say something like, "I am concerned because you are so critical of yourself. You are a very special person, and I care about you, but I'm worried that things are not going well for you. Have you thought of getting help?"
- Steer her toward help. You can't make someone with an eating disorder eat properly, but you can show compassion and concern. You can say, "I'm not in a position to counsel you about what's going on, but I can help you find someone who can." If she works for a company with an employee assistance program (EAP), their counselors can help. Many addiction treatment centers and hospitals offer programs for people with eating disorders.
- If she refuses to acknowledge a problem or any reason for your concern, repeat the reasons for your concern, and let her know you will be there for her if things change.
- If the person's health is in imminent danger, you must intervene. People with eating disorders can die from starvation or excessive vomiting. Call a doctor or take your friend to the emergency room if you see signs of real trouble.

May Be a Link to Other Addictions

There may be a link to other addictive behaviors. Gordon says that of those being treated for drug and alcohol addiction at the Caron Foundation, 15 percent also have eating disorders.

Some have used alcohol, amphetamines, cocaine, and even heroin as appetite suppressants.