

Talking to your child about an eating disorder

Approaching the topic of eating disorders with your child can be a daunting prospect. Remember that recovery is so much more difficult in an atmosphere of secrecy and denial, and the disorder will not go away by itself. Talking about it is an essential first step.

Tips for talking to your child about an eating disorder for the first time:

- Get some help for yourself first by talking to a friend or professional about your concerns.
- Prepare what you want to say, and how you're going to say it.
- Choose a place where you both feel safe and won't be disturbed.
- Choose a time when neither of you are angry or upset – avoid any time just before or after meals.
- Have some information about eating disorders to hand, for example from [Beat \(link is external\)](#). Refer to them if the person seems to be listening, or leave resources behind for them to look at on their own.
- Talk to them one-to-one – if other people are around, the person you are talking to may feel you're ganging up on them.
- Be prepared for them to be angry and emotional, and say hurtful things.
- Don't be disheartened if you're met with denial.

What to say and how to cope

- Avoid commenting on weight gain/ loss or appearance

Sometimes it can feel impossible to say or do the right thing when it comes to eating disorders. Light-hearted comments like 'you better not lose any more weight or you'll disappear' can give a perverse sense of achievement to the sufferer, further fuelling their eating disorder. Meanwhile, voicing worries with more seriousness can make the sufferer defensive, in the fear that you might try to deter them from continuing their 'diet'.

It's better to steer clear of weight-talk altogether and focus instead on what is going on underneath. Instead of saying, 'I'm worried about you, you've lost a lot of weight recently', try, 'I'm worried about you, you've seemed very sad and withdrawn recently'. It is so important to disallow weight from being the 'central issue' – it's just the by-product.

- Be aware that they're likely to be feeling embarrassed, ashamed and scared.
- Don't label them or attempt to trick them into admitting they have an eating disorder.

- Re-affirm your love for them – i.e. if they say, “I hate you”, you say, “Well I don’t hate you, I love you”.
- Use “I” sentences (“I am worried as I’ve noticed you don’t seem happy”) instead of “you” sentences (“you need to get help”).
- Thinking of the eating disorder as a gremlin or monster on the shoulder of the sufferer may help you to not take things that they say or do too personally, or to blame or resent them.
- Aim to get treatment as early as possible. Children as young as six have been admitted to hospital with eating disorders. And multiple studies show that the sooner you get treatment, the better your chances of recovery.

If your child shows signs of an eating disorder

If a young person exhibits just some of the signs of an eating disorder, and seems unhappy and not themselves, it’s important to seek professional support, as smaller problems can develop into a more serious, long-standing mental health condition.

Beat’s helpline is available for parents and carers and can give more advice on how to broach the subject of eating disorders. Call 0845 634 1414 or contact Beat on help@b-eat.co.uk (link sends e-mail).