HOW TO START A CONVERSATION WHEN YOU'RE WORRIED SOMEONE HAS AN EATING DISORDER

Beat
Eating disorders

RED CAN

How to start a conversation when you're worried someone has an eating disorder

Noticing changes in someone's relationship with food, their emotions, or their behaviour can be worrying. You may feel unsure whether it's your place to say something, or fear saying the wrong thing. These worries are natural, but silence can make things harder.

Eating disorders are serious mental illnesses, and they are never anyone's fault. People affected often don't realise they're unwell or feel unable to talk about it. Breaking the silence, gently and calmly, can be an important step toward their recovery.

Your role is not to diagnose, fix, or have the "perfect" words, it's about showing care, listening, and staying present.

How to Approach the Conversation

Prepare

- Reflect on what you want to say, keeping your focus on concern and care rather than food or weight. While it may be necessary to bring this up to explain why you're worried, these may be things they're particularly sensitive about. Remember, eating disorders are about what the person is feeling rather than how they treat food.
- Learn the basics about eating disorders so you feel more confident and informed.

Choose the Right Moment and Space

- Pick a quiet, private place where you both feel safe and are unlikely to be disturbed.
- Avoid conversations just before or after meals.
- Choose a time where emotions don't feel too high – avoid approaching the conversation following a disagreement, for example.
- Approach them one-to-one. Being confronted by several people can feel overwhelming.

Start Gently

- Use "I" statements to avoid sounding accusatory.
  - *"I'm worried about how you've been feeling lately."*
  - *"I've noticed you seem overwhelmed, would you like to talk?"*
- Mention only a small number of things that concern you so they don't feel watched.

Focus on Feelings, Not Food

- This conversation is not about what they've eaten or their weight.
- Eating disorders are often rooted in distress, fear, and emotional pain — try to help them talk about what's underneath.

If They React Defensively

- Stay calm and compassionate.
- Expect that they may feel anger, fear, or denial. These reactions can be part of the illness and often come from this fear or distress; they are not a rejection of you.
- Reassure them: *"I care about you. I'm here when you're ready."*

Try Again Soon

If the first attempt to talk about it doesn't go well, don't give up. Eating disorders thrive on secrecy — your continued care helps break that isolation.

How to be supportive

- **Talk to them as a whole person.** Ask how they are, , and what they need — not just about your concerns.
- **Educate yourself.** Understanding the illness helps you respond with patience and empathy.
- **Stop 'body talk'.** Avoid comments about weight, shape, or appearance — even comments with positive intentions or ones directed at other people's bodies, can be misinterpreted.
- **Be consistent.** Let them know you're there to listen, to support, and to spend time together like you normally would.

Next Steps

If the person acknowledges they need help:

- Encourage them to seek support from a GP or health professional.
- Offer to help them make the appointment or go with them.

If they say nothing is wrong:

- Trust your instincts — denial is common.
- Stay observant, stay gentle, and revisit the conversation.
- Beat's Helpline can provide advice on next steps

If the person you're worried about is at immediate risk of harm, you can reach out to emergency services on their behalf, or offer to take them to A&E. For medical advice, you can call 111.

- Beat's website has some more information on support services available.

Where to Get Support for Yourself

Supporting someone can be emotionally heavy. You aren't wholly responsible for your loved one, and you deserve support too.

- **Contact your local charity for support -** visit REDCAN.org.uk/charities to find your local eating disorder charity
- **Beat Helpline:** 0808 801 0677
- **Beat website:** information, guides, and support groups
- Local and online communities – connect with others going through the same as you – such as Beat's community on POD – their e-learning and resource hub for family and friends.

You don't need to have all the answers — your compassion matters more than perfect wording.

Produced by Beat in collaboration with the Regional Eating Disorders Charity Alliance/Network (REDCAN).

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