

## Understanding Eating Disorders

The term 'Eating Disorder' refers to eating patterns that are damaging to someone's physical or mental health. It is a serious medical condition that can cause both physical and emotional damage.

Often people with eating disorders say that the eating disorder is the only way they feel they can **control their life**. The reality is the **eating disorder itself is in control**. Recognizing what has changed in your friend's life, and what part of their life they may have lost control of, may be a good starting point to **set them on the road to recovery**.

Food is central to our lives: not only for nourishment but it is also a significant focus of people's social lives, especially at university, where people tend to see each other at meal times. This is why suffering from an eating disorder can be so hard for students: it's not only an issue in itself, but also may make it harder to carry on the norms of socialising. Understanding this is central to helping your friend.

Problems with food can have many triggers, to cope with boredom, stress, anger, loneliness, anxiety, depression, or as a response to a painful situation or feelings. It is unlikely that an eating disorder will result from a single cause, it is more likely to be a combination of factors, events, feelings or pressures.

Anyone can develop an eating disorder, regardless of age, sex, cultural or racial background. The people most likely to be affected tend to be young women between the ages of 15-25. What is important to remember is that **every student suffering from an eating disorder will have an individual expression** of the condition.

## Want more help or information?

### CUSU EDS (Eating Disorders Support)

[www.cusu.cam.ac.uk/welfare/eatingdisorders/](http://www.cusu.cam.ac.uk/welfare/eatingdisorders/)

Support for individuals / [eds@cusu.cam.ac.uk](mailto:eds@cusu.cam.ac.uk) / 07999859940 (Welfare Phone) 9am-6pm

Welfare Officer / [welfare@cusu.cam.ac.uk](mailto:welfare@cusu.cam.ac.uk)

Women's Officer / [womens@cusu.cam.ac.uk](mailto:womens@cusu.cam.ac.uk)

### University Counselling Service

An excellent self-help leaflet on eating disorders:

[www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/eating.html](http://www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/eating.html)

For counselling and advice /

<https://forms.counselling.cam.ac.uk/form>

### B-Eat (National Eating Disorders charity)

[www.b-eat.co.uk/](http://www.b-eat.co.uk/)

Helpline / 0845 634 1414 / [help@b-eat.co.uk](mailto:help@b-eat.co.uk)

### National Centre for Eating Disorders

[www.eating-disorders.org.uk/](http://www.eating-disorders.org.uk/)

### Something Fishy

[www.something-fishy.org/helping/whatyoucando](http://www.something-fishy.org/helping/whatyoucando)



# Eating Disorders Support

## *Worried about a friend?*

If you are worried about a friend and think they may be suffering from an **eating disorder**, or are already **supporting a student**, this leaflet will give you basic information on **warning signs**, supporting **recovery** and sources for **further information** on Eating Disorders themselves.

## Warning Signs

### *Have you noticed behaviour that has worried you in a friend?*

If your friend is suffering, they may be trying to hide the problem. However **there are warning signs you can watch for**. In the early stages, it can be challenging to tell the difference between an eating disorder and self-consciousness, weight concerns, or dieting. As eating disorders progress, the red flags become easier to spot. But a person with an eating disorder will often go to great lengths to hide the problem, so it's important to know the warning signs:

- Restricting food or dieting
- Bingeing or purging
- Distorted body image and altered appearance
- Preoccupation with body or weight
- Obsession with calories, food, or nutrition
- Obsession with weight or BMI
- Constant dieting, even when thin
- Rapid, unexplained weight loss or weight gain
- Taking laxatives or diet pills
- Compulsive exercising
- Making excuses to get out of eating
- Avoiding socialising that involve food
- Going to the bathroom right after meals
- Eating alone, at night, or in secret
- Hoarding high-calorie food

Occasionally, students may not even realize their relationship with food is disordered, so make sure you talk to your friend, as your comments might be **the trigger that helps** your friend.

## Supporting a Friend

First of all, remember that your friend is a person first, and someone who has difficulty with food second, and **don't stop all normal activity with them**.

You will probably want to dedicate a lot of time to your friend, but **you need look after yourself**. By having some time away from your friend, you will be better placed to support them.

**You can't force your friend to change their behaviours or beliefs**, but you can make a difference by showing that you care, offering your support, and encouraging the person to seek professional help. If your friend trusts you, you might find them relying on you for help throughout recovery, so there are a couple of things you can do that you might find helpful.

**Talk to your friend about your concerns**, and make sure you have examples of the behavior that you think needs attention. Take care to **avoid conflict**, especially if they refuse to acknowledge that there is a problem. Try to act concerned, not aggressive, which will leave you open and available as a supportive listener and friend.

**Do not shame, blame, or guilt** your friend regarding their actions or attitudes. Do not use accusatory "you" statements like, "You just need to eat." Instead, use "I" statements, such as "I'm concerned about you because you refuse to eat lunch." Or, "It makes me afraid to hear you vomiting."

**Avoid giving simple solutions.** For example, "If you'd just stop, then everything would be fine!"

If your friend is already receiving additional support from other sources, that is great, however there is the chance that you are the only person your friend has confided in. If this is the case, try to **encourage them to tell someone else** (for example, a friend, college nurse, or tutor). This is for two reasons: it means they can find additional support and it means you don't feel as pressured in supporting them.

If your friend does not want to tell anyone else at the moment, or is scared of getting further help, that is alright. **They might not feel ready to tell others**, and forcing them will not help. Just keep encouraging them to tell someone they feel comfortable talking to. Remember that you can always tell someone else **in confidence** (without revealing their name) **for your own peace of mind**.

## In a crisis

It is hard to recognise when to take the next step – when the eating disorder has **taken over your friend's life** to the point that you need to break confidence and get them urgent medical attention.

Key things to look out for are if they are dangerously malnourished, severely depressed or suicidal, suffering from medical complications or getting worse despite treatment.

If you notice these symptoms, **talk to a medical professional**, either a college nurse, by calling NHS Direct (0845 4647) or the emergency services (999).