



How To Help a Student

This information sheet has been developed as a resource for teachers, school nurses, counselors, and other school personnel who will be speaking with a student and family about a possible eating disorder. Schools may want to designate a staff member as the school's eating disorders resource person. It is also useful to develop a protocol or guidelines to follow that relate specifically to eating disorders. The following suggestions can be incorporated into your school's protocol.

A student who is not eating or eating too much may need professional help

Many people think that young people are being picky or difficult or “normal” if they are not eating properly. In reality, these behaviors may be students’ desperate way of trying to cope with underlying problems. As a result, students may be upset or angry if you try to help them. They may actually be afraid. In addition to denying the problem, students with eating disorders may be upset that you discovered their secret and feel threatened by your caring.

It is extremely difficult to diagnose an eating disorder. Having a concern that something may be wrong is enough to initiate a conversation with the student and a family member about referring the student to a professional. Share information with other school personnel and decide together who would be the best person to speak with the student and her or his family.

Plan carefully what you will say to the student

Arrange to speak with the student in private and with plenty of time to avoid feeling rushed. People with eating disorders are sensitive to words and nonverbal behaviors that may be interpreted as negative

judgments of them. Be sure to communicate care and concern; mention the specific behaviors you have noticed; state your belief that further evaluation is necessary; and say that you are available for further discussion and support. *Be prepared to take immediate action if the student is clearly starving, binge eating, or purging frequently.*

Begin by gently telling the student that you care about her or him. For example: “I’m concerned about you. Lately, you seem to be unhappy/sad/preoccupied/anxious/irritable/tired.”

Indicate, in a direct and nonjudgmental way, the specific incidents that have aroused your concern. For example: “I’ve seen you throw out your lunch,” “I’ve seen you leave class and run to the bathroom,” “I’ve often heard you say you are concerned about your weight.”

Listen to what the student says without interruption and without making any judgments. The student may deny that there is a problem or be upset. Stay calm and repeat what the student says to be sure you have listened, heard, and understood the student’s thoughts and feelings. Don’t get into a “Yes, you do/No, I don’t” power struggle, use scare tactics, or prolong a conversation that is going poorly.

State your belief that the student should talk to someone with special expertise in eating behaviors. Restate the specifics of why you are concerned and your belief that something further must be done. Remind the student that teachers care and want to help. Say “let’s find out if there is a problem.”



Decide with the student what will happen next.

Maybe you will decide to have further discussions about the issue, or perhaps the next step will be to speak with the student's family. Be sure not to make any promises that you can't keep, such as promising not to tell a parent or coach about your concerns.

Let the student's family know about your concern

When you tell family members your concerns about their child, they may react in a number of different ways, including denying that a problem exists. However, simply by having a conversation with them, you will increase their awareness. They will remember the conversation even if they do not take immediate action. Be assured that they will start to pay more attention to their child's eating behaviors.

Here are some suggestions on how to speak to parents:

- ◆ Say you are concerned about their child. Indicate the specific incidents that have aroused your concerns.
- ◆ Keep the focus on the child feeling healthy and functioning effectively, not on weight, shape, or morality.
- ◆ Emphasize that only an expert in eating disorders can determine if there is a problem. Take a "let's find out" attitude.
- ◆ State that the research shows that treatment is necessary if an eating disorder exists and that the earlier treatment begins, the better the chances are for success.

Your goal is to have the student talk with a professional with expertise in diagnosing eating disorders. However, family members may be more willing to talk to their physician or a nutritionist first. Ask if you may call their physician to describe the signs and symptoms you have noticed. If they would like to take their child to a nutritionist, be sure that you refer them to someone with expertise in eating disorders.

"At first we thought we could tell her, 'Stop it,' and she would. We thought this was self-indulgent behavior. It was only after counseling that we understood that you can't just say, 'Cut it out.'"

—Parents of teenager with an eating disorder, excerpted from *People* magazine, April 12, 1999

Provide family members with more information on eating disorders

Prepare a list of eating disorder resources that includes contact names and phone numbers. Call local hospitals and mental health professionals and ask about eating disorder resources. Check with your district's resource person for health education, school health, or counseling. You may also consider contacting the national resources listed on this fact sheet.

Gather educational material appropriate for family members. Included in this packet is "Detecting Eating Disorders," an article originally published in *Parents* magazine and an information sheet for family members written in Spanish.

Resources

The National Women's Health Information Center
Tel: (800) 994-9662; Web site: www.4woman.gov

Girl Power!

Tel: (800) 729-6686; Web site: www.health.org/gpower

American Anorexia/Bulimia Association

Tel: 212-575-6200; Web site: www.aabainc.org

National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders

Tel: 847-831-3438

Web site: <http://members.aol.com/anad20>

Eating Disorders Awareness and Prevention, Inc.

Tel: 206-382-3587; Referral Hotline: 800-931-2237

Web site: <http://members.aol.com/edapinc>

Harvard Eating Disorders Center

Tel: 617-236-7766; Web site: www.hedc.org

Massachusetts Eating Disorder Association, Inc.

Tel: 617-558-1881; Web site: www.medainc.org

National Eating Disorders Organization

Tel: 918-481-4044

Web site: www.laureate.com/nedo/nedointro.asp

Pennsylvania Educational Network for Eating Disorders

Tel: 412-366-9966; E-mail: PENED1@aol.com
