

EATING DISORDER SUPPORT GUIDE

**FOR
ATHLETES**

Navigating conversations about eating disorders can be challenging, and athletes can feel particularly motivated to hide their thoughts and behaviors in an attempt to continue participation in their sport.

Even so, some athletes who have experienced an eating disorder report that having someone important to them express concern greatly contributed to their ability to accept and find help.

As challenging as the recovery process might be, know that you have the opportunity to help by reaching out and offering support.

SELF-REFLECTING BEFORE OFFERING HELP

Before having a conversation about eating and body image concerns with someone close to you, think about your role in their life. This check-in will help you acknowledge how you can offer support without overstepping boundaries.

Ask yourself: How might my relationship to this person influence our conversation?

Parents: Don't let eligibility drive the conversation

Peers: Drop any thoughts of judgment and comparison

Next, note why you want to have this conversation. Remove any reason that doesn't include concern for their health and well-being. Remember: there's more to eating disorders than meets the eye and there's more to athletes than participation in sport. Leave aesthetic and athletic-driven motivations at the door.

Ask yourself: Why do I want to have this conversation?

Compassionate reasons include:

- Create space for understanding and validate feelings
- Aid in the search for treatment (therapist, nutritionist, physician)
- Check-in and encourage ongoing recovery

HOW TO TALK ABOUT IT

USE COMPASSION

- Use “I” statements instead of “you” statements.
- When choosing a place to talk, avoid meeting in places where food is the focal point (E.g. at a dining hall).
- Make sure to meet them in a private and not a public setting.
- Be specific when noting concerning behaviors but ask open-ended questions to hear their perspective.
- “I’m concerned about you because I’ve noticed ___ (you seem stressed/tired; you’ve been missing meals). Is something going on?”

DE-EMPHASIZE APPEARANCE

- Only medical professionals should comment on weight and provide nutrition advice.
- Emphasize that there is no reason to feel ashamed of struggling with food and body image.
- There is no “right” body type as an athlete and there are many factors that contribute to success (sleep, energy, and stress to name a few).
- Ask about feelings rather than appearance. Eating disorders are almost never only about appearance. Feeling out of control, insecure, guilty, unsafe, and shameful also often contribute to EDs.

ADDRESS ATHLETE-SPECIFIC CONCERNS

- “Does my team/coach know?” → Coach may know that the athlete is seeking treatment, but not details of the treatment.
- “Will I get pulled from my sport?” → Athletic participation is secondary to health and well-being.
- “But I’m still playing well...” → Even if you’re playing well now, the eating disorder may affect that in the future.
- “My sport makes these thoughts worse.” → Getting treatment may help with the thoughts/feelings that come up in sport.
- In all of these instances, offer support in the search for treatment (provide resources, suggest therapists), or help connect the athlete with a professional that can recommend resources and therapists. If you’re a peer or teammate, encourage them to speak to their parents.

AVOID THESE APPROACHES

- Don’t criticize an athlete’s food choices or how they eat.
- Don’t use language that places blame (“you’re making me worried”).
- Don’t use manipulative or threatening statements (“think about what you’re doing to me,” “I’m going to tell”).
- Don’t give simple solutions (“just eat more,” “you just need to accept yourself”).
- Don’t diagnose.

EXAMPLES OF OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS TO ASK SOMEONE YOU'RE CONCERNED ABOUT:

- 1 How long has this been going on?
- 2 What can I do to best support you?
- 3 Would you like me to mention this to anyone else or join you while you have a conversation with a parent/coach?
- 4 Would you like me to help you find a therapist?
- 5 Would you like me to go with you to appointments?
- 6 Would you like me to check in on how you're doing?

WHY LANGUAGES MATTERS

Questions and comments about an athlete's weight and appearance, even if they are off-handed and well-intended, can have lasting effects on them. Do your best to avoid appearance-based comments about an athlete's weight or their relationship to food. Especially for athletes in recovery, even well-intentioned compliments like, "You're looking healthier," can be misconstrued as a comment about weight gain. Instead, show unconditional support and focus on compliments related to character, style, or just ask them how they're doing and let them bring up their recovery process if they'd like to.

Keep in Mind

- Check in often and focus on how they are feeling.
- Conversations should be about health (not weight, calories, or size).
- Don't talk about food being "healthy" or "unhealthy." One goal of recovery is to stop putting food in categories.
- If you're a coach or a teammate, take measures to prevent "fat talk" or toxic body comments that are prevalent in the locker room and at practice.
- Remind the athlete that you are there for them but remember that it is not your job to offer nutritional advice or psychological advice.
- Educate yourself. Lacking proper knowledge about EDs can make the person you are supporting feel like their challenges are minimized.
- Express gratitude. Thank the person you are supporting for allowing you into this vulnerable process.

Affirmations That Aren't About Appearance

Showing Support:

- "I'm so proud of you!"
- "I'm here for you."
- "You've got this."
- "It's okay to take time to rest."

Giving Compliments:

- "You're so funny"
- "I love spending time with you"
- "You're so easy to talk to"
- "You're so smart/kind"

Key Conversation Takeaways

- Express specific concerns
- Ask open-ended questions
- Respect the sensitivity of the subject
- Practice non-judgment
- Show unconditional support



HOW TO START A CONVERSATION IF YOU'RE STRUGGLING

If you're concerned about your relationship with food and body image, the idea of reaching out to someone for support, especially as an athlete, can feel overwhelming. Remember, there is no "right" or "wrong" way to tell someone about your eating disorder, and it is helpful to be as honest and straightforward as possible about how you're feeling. Reaching out for support is way more important than knowing exactly what you want to say.

STEPS FOR REACHING OUT

1. Approach someone you trust and feel comfortable talking to, such as a trainer, parent, friend, counselor.
2. Communicate however feels more comfortable for you. Meet face-to-face, over the phone/video call, or write a letter.
3. Be kind to yourself. Opening up takes courage and vulnerability. There are additional resources available and ways to seek support even if the conversation doesn't go as planned.

CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. *"I'm worried. I think I have an unhealthy relationship to food."*
2. *"I'm feeling really drained but feel really guilty about eating."*
3. *"I'm thinking about food all the time and don't know how to stop."*
4. *"I think I have an eating disorder."*
5. *"My friends/parents have said they're worried about my eating."*

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- National Eating Disorder Association Helpline (call or text 800-931-2237)
- National Eating Disorder website: www.nationaleatingdisorders.org
- For crisis situations, text "NEDA" to 741741 to be connected with a trained volunteer at the Crisis Text Line.
- Athlete-specific resource: <https://appliedsportpsych.org/about-the-association-for-applied-sport-psychology/special-interest-groups/eating-disorders/>

SOURCES:

Guide reviewed by Dr. Hayley Perelman

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