



Bulimia Anorexia Nervosa Association
2109 Ottawa Street, Suite 400, Windsor, Ontario N8Y 1R8

T: 519-969-2112
F: 519-969-0227

association de la boulimie et de l'anorexie mentale
2109 Rue d'Ottawa, la Suite 400, Windsor, Ontario N8Y 1R8

E: info@bana.ca
I: www.bana.ca

Approaching Someone You Suspect has an Eating Disorder

Tips On How To Approach Someone You Think May Have An Eating Disorder

Before you approach someone you suspect has an eating disorder, I would highly recommend that you educate yourself. Too many people believe that eating disorders are only about food and weight issues, when in reality, those are just the symptoms of underlying problems. Below is a list of some things to keep in mind when approaching someone.

1. *Avoid talking about food and weight, those aren't the real issues.*
2. *Assure them that they are not alone and that you love them and want to help in any way that you can.*
3. *Encourage them to seek help.*
4. *Never try to force them to eat.*
5. *Don't comment on their weight or appearance, your comments may be taken the wrong way.*
6. *Don't blame the individual and don't get angry with them.*
7. *Be patient, recovery takes time.*
8. *Don't make mealtimes a battleground.*
9. *Listen to them, don't be quick to give opinions and advice.*
10. *Don't take on the role of a therapist.*

It's important to remember that when you first approach the person you suspect has an eating disorder, they may react with anger or they may deny that anything is wrong. Don't push the issue, just let them know that you will always be there for them if they need to talk. In cases where the person is extremely underweight or is bingeing/purging several times a day, you may need to step in and take control. I would only recommend doing that if the individual's health is in extreme danger. If that is the case, you may need to speak to a doctor about a forced hospitalization.

Watching someone you love slowly kill themselves can be frightening. You will probably experience feelings of distress, anger, guilt and confusion. No matter how much you want to help them, you must remember that only they can make the decision to get help. You can't force them to do this.

You must also be careful with the remarks you make to the person suffering. Below is a list of a few remarks that should never be made because they will usually only drive the person away or cause them more inner pain and guilt.

1. *"Just sit down and eat like a normal person." If it were that easy, we would. Remind yourself that there are deeper emotional issues that may be preventing them from eating properly.*
2. *"Why are you doing this to me?" We aren't doing this to you, we are doing this to ourselves. A comment like that would only cause us more guilt and make us feel worse about ourselves.*
3. *"You've put on weight, you look great!" We don't hear "you look great", we only hear "you've put on weight" leading us to believe that we are fat.*
4. *"Are you making any progress?" If in therapy, a comment like that could lead us to believe that we aren't making progress and that we are in fact failing.*
5. *"I'll help to fatten you up!" The words "fatten you up" are very terrifying to a person with an eating disorder. Comments like this can be very damaging.*

A Centre for Eating Disorders, Health and Wellness



Bulimia Anorexia Nervosa Association
2109 Ottawa Street, Suite 400, Windsor, Ontario N8Y 1R8

T: 519-969-2112
F: 519-969-0227

association de la boulimie et de l'anorexie mentale
2109 Rue d'Ottawa, la Suite 400, Windsor, Ontario N8Y 1R8

E: info@bana.ca
I: www.bana.ca

6. "Are you keeping anything down?" or "When was the last time you puked?" The act of purging can leave the person with feelings of guilt and shame having someone ask this question can cause them to re-experience those feelings and leave them feeling ashamed for having a problem.

7. "You look terrible." Avoid commenting on the person's appearance. The person is already obsessed with their body, they don't need to hear any negative comments.

8. "You are ruining our family." Comments like this only cause the person more guilt. It will not motivate them to change, instead, it may drive them into deeper isolation.

9. "What have you eaten today?" This puts us in a bad position because we either have to lie to make you happy (which causes us to feel worse for doing so), or tell the truth and hear a lecture (which would lead us to feel like we are failing).

10. "If you think you are fat, you must think that I'm obese!" Even though we are under weight, we still feel fat and see ourselves in the mirror as fat. We don't see other as being over weight. The only distorted image we have, is of ourselves. Anyway, it's best not to mention size and weight around any one with an eating disorder.

11. "Go ahead and have a drink or eat that you'll just go and throw it up anyway, so what does it matter?" A comment like this is very insensitive and cruel. Unfortunately, there are actually people who would say this. We already put ourselves down enough as it is and the last thing we need is someone else making us feel guilty or ashamed for having an eating disorder. If you have nothing positive to say to us, don't say anything!

12. "I wish I had that problem." or "I wish I could be anorexic for a day." No you don't! Everyday we struggle with this problem and go through tremendous pain in trying to overcome it. We wouldn't wish this problem on anyone, not even our worst enemies. It's hard for us to hear a comment like that because we know how terrible it is to live with an eating disorder.

13. "For someone with an eating disorder- you're sure pigging out today " Believe it or not, some people would actually make a comment like that. This comment is very insensitive and it could cause the person to panic about what they have eaten and end up purging.

14. "You look so healthy, you were always so thin before" If you make a comment like that, you are telling us that we are getting fat! We may in fact be looking better and looking much healthier, but when we hear comments like that, we will be made to feel that we are in fact getting fat. It really is best not to comment on a person's appearance.

If you've had comments made to you that you felt were inappropriate and shouldn't be said to someone suffering from an eating disorder, please e mail colleen@viane.on.ca and I will include it on this list.

Someone with an eating disorder has the best chance for recovery when they are surrounded by people that are loving and supportive. Recovery takes a lot of time and hard work, but with the proper treatment, which should include individual, group and family therapy, support groups, medical and nutritional counselling, eating disorders can be overcome.

I would also recommend to the families to get support for themselves. Dealing with someone that has an eating disorder can be frustrating and emotionally exhausting. You may want to seek the help of a therapist or a support group to help you through this difficult time.

Copyright © Welcome to the Bulimia Anorexia Nervosa Association - 2008

A Centre for Eating Disorders, Health and Wellness