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In our image-obsessed culture, lots of teens (and adults, for that matter) are critical of their bodies.

Many diet or exercise to try to change how they look. But normal concerns about body image cross the line and become eating disorders when a person starts to do things that are physically and emotionally dangerous - things that could have long-term health consequences.



Some people go on starvation diets and become anorexic, and others go on eating binges and then purge their bodies of the food they've just eaten through forced vomiting, compulsive exercise, taking laxatives, or a combination of these.

Although eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia are far more common in girls, guys can get them, too. So how do you know if a friend has an eating disorder? It can be hard to tell - after all, someone who's lost a lot of weight or feels constantly tired may have another type of health condition. But some of the signs that a friend may have an eating disorder include:

- Your friend has an obsession with weight and food (more than general comments about how many calories he or she eats in a day). It might seem like your friend talks about food and nothing else.
- Your friend knows exactly how many calories and fat grams are in everything that he or she eats - and is constantly pointing this out.
- Your friend feels the need to exercise all the time, even

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when sick or exhausted.

- Your friend avoids hanging out with you and other friends during meals. For example, he or she avoids the school cafeteria at lunch or the restaurant where you usually meet on weekends.
- Your friend starts to wear big or baggy clothes. Lots of people wear baggy clothes, but someone who wears baggy clothes to conceal a body he or she doesn't like isn't following a fashion trend.
- Your friend goes on dramatic or very restrictive diets, cuts food into tiny pieces, moves food around on the plate instead of eating it, and is very precise about how food is arranged on the plate.
- Your friend goes to the bathroom a lot, especially right after meals, or you've heard your friend vomiting after eating.
- Despite losing a lot of weight, your friend always talks about how fat he or she is.
- Your friend appears to be gaining a lot of weight even though you never see him or her eat.
- Your friend frequently takes laxatives, steroids, or diet pills.
- Your friend has a tendency to faint, bruises easily, is very pale, or starts complaining of being cold more than usual (cold intolerance can be a symptom of being underweight).

If your friend has these symptoms and you're concerned, the first thing to do might be to talk to your friend, privately, about what you have noticed. Tell your friend that you're worried. Be as gentle as possible, and try to really listen to and be supportive of your friend and what he or she is going through.

It's normal for a person with an eating disorder to be defensive and angry when confronted for the first time. Try not to get angry back at your friend; just remind him or her that you care. Trying to help someone who doesn't think he or she needs help can be hard - people with eating disorders often have trouble admitting, even to themselves, that they have a problem. Of course, it's not your job to diagnose your friend - that's the job of a doctor. But if your friend is willing to seek help, offer to go with him or her to see a counselor or a medical expert.

If your concerns increase and your friend still seems to be in denial, talk to your parents, the school guidance counselor or nurse, or your friend's parents. This isn't easy to do because it can feel like betraying a friend, but it's often necessary to get your friend the help he or she needs.

An eating disorder is a very difficult illness. You can support your friend by learning as much as you can about eating disorders. Your friend's body image and behavior may be a symptom of another underlying illness. There are lots of organizations, books, websites, hotlines, or other resources devoted to helping people who are battling eating disorders. Click on the Resources tab for some of these.

Being a supportive friend also means learning how to behave around someone with an eating disorder. Here are some things you can do to support a friend who is battling an eating problem:

- Avoid talking about food.
- Avoid being overly watchful of your friend's eating habits, food amounts, and choices.
- Avoid making statements like, "If you'd just eat or stop exercising, you'll get better."
- Avoid reinforcing the idea that this is all about your friend's physical appearance.

Most importantly, remind your friend that you care - no matter how he or she looks.

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