

## **How to Help a Friend with an Eating Disorder**

### **1. What is an Eating Disorder?**

Anorexia nervosa is characterized by restricted eating and refusal to maintain normal body weight; persistent fear of being fat; feeling fat when one is not; absent or erratic menstrual cycles.

Bulimia nervosa occurs when there are recurrent episodes of binge eating and a feeling of lack of control over eating; regular use of self-induced vomiting, laxatives, diuretics, fasting or exercise to prevent weight gain, persistent over concern with weight.

Eating disorders are often associated with high achievement orientation and perfectionism, a need for control, poor self-esteem and feelings of shame. The person (male or female) may become depressed or suicidal. Causes are still unclear, but are probably complex and multiple, including sociocultural, psychological and biological factors. Without treatment, eating disorders can become chronic and progressive and may eventually become life threatening.

### **2 What can I do?**

If you and others have observed behaviors in your friend or roommate that are suggestive of an eating disorder, you are in a position to help.

- make a plan to approach the person in a private place when there is no immediate stress and time to talk.
- Present in a caring but straightforward way what you have observed and what your concerns are. Tell her or him that you are worried and want to help. (Friends who are too angry with the person to talk supportive should not be part of this discussion.)
- Give the person time to talk and encourage them to verbalize feelings. Ask clarifying questions. Listen carefully; accept what is said non-judgmentally.
- Do not argue about whether there is or is not a problem—power struggles are not helpful. Perhaps you could say, "I hear what you are saying and I hope you're right that this isn't a problem. But I am still worried about what I've seen and heard and that isn't going to go away".
- Provide information about resources for treatment which include the Counseling Center and the Health Center. It can be helpful to offer to go with the person and wait while they have their first appointment. Ask them to consider going for one appointment before they make a decision about ongoing treatment.

-- If you are concerned that the eating disorder is severe or life-threatening, enlist the help of a counseling center faculty member, or a relative, friend or roommate of the person to help you to intervene. Present a united and supportive front with others.

-- If the person denies the problem, becomes angry or refuses treatment understand that this is often part of the illness. Besides, they have a right to refuse treatment (unless their life is in danger). You may feel helpless, angry and frustrated with them. You might say, "I know you can refuse to go for help, but that won't stop me from worrying about you or caring about you. I may bring this up to you again later and maybe we can talk more about it then." Follow through on that and any other promise you make.

-- Don't try to be a hero or a rescuer; you will probably be resented. If you do the best you can to help on several occasions and the person does not accept it, stop. Remind yourself you have done all that is reasonable to do. Realize that there are no quick and easy solutions to an eating disorder. Eating disorders are stubborn problems and treatment is most effective when the person is truly ready for it. You may have planted a seed that helps them get ready.

- Eating disorders are usually not emergency situations, but if the person is suicidal or otherwise in serious danger, get professional help immediately!

University of Northern Colorado Counseling Center  
Cassidy Hall, 2nd floor  
1901 10<sup>th</sup> Ave  
Greeley CO 80639  
970-351-2496

Hours: M-F, 8-12 and 1-5pm