

Helping someone who has an eating disorder

Eating disorders can be among the most difficult afflictions for family members and friends to understand. Feelings of frustration and helplessness are common. Early diagnosis and treatment can save the life of a person with an eating disorder, but it is important to remember that only an experienced doctor or therapist can treat them effectively.

If the person has lost a significant amount of his or her normal body weight, or you feel that his or her life is in danger, seek immediate medical attention. The following are some additional tips if someone you know is suffering from an eating disorder.

Do . . .

- Educate yourself. Read as much as possible about eating disorders. This will help you understand the problem and put you in a better position to help those around you.
- Listen. People with eating disorders often feel ashamed and alone. Your support may provide the strength the person needs to seek professional help.
- Encourage the person to get help. Try to get the person to seek professional help, but don't be too forceful. This will make the person more anxious, and could discourage the person from seeking help. Unless in immediate danger, avoid forcing the person to get help.

Don't . . .

- Nag about eating or not eating. People with eating disorders are extremely self-conscious about their eating habits. By nagging, you will just make them more uncomfortable and reinforce the behavior.
- Hide food to keep the person from binge eating. Although people with bulimia or binge eating disorder may ask for your help, hiding food from them will only create resentment.
- Force the person to eat. Forcing the person to eat will make him or her feel childish, out-of-control, disapproved of, and scolded. Once again, this just reinforces the behavior.



Help is available

An eating disorder is an illness that is difficult to understand. Identifying and treating these disorders can also be hard. But the sooner a person is diagnosed, the better the chances are for recovery. While you can't force someone to seek help, you can educate yourself and develop a support system for those around you who may be at risk. The good news is that most people do well in treatment and can recover from eating disorders.

Access helpful resources

It may help to talk with someone you can trust, such as a doctor or nurse, local mental health professional or member of the clergy.

This document is for your information only. It is not meant to give medical advice. It should not be used to replace a visit with a provider. Magellan does not endorse other resources that may be mentioned here.