

Approaching your teenager about an eating issue

Deciding how to talk to your teenager about eating can be very hard. It helps to think about what you're going to say before you talk to them.

Try to maximise the chances of a positive conversation. Avoid using labelling or judgemental language.

Choose a time when you're both feeling calm and are unlikely to be distracted. Pick a safe and comfortable place.

Choose your words carefully

It's important to let your teenager know you're raising your concerns because you genuinely care about them. Come straight to the point and have examples to back up your concerns.

Tell your teenager you've seen behaviour that worries you. Tell them you're worried they have developed an eating disorder. It can be useful to have a list of warning signs or behaviours that you've seen. It can be more difficult for them to deny things if you have some solid examples.

Focus on feelings – yours and theirs. This makes it less likely that they'll interpret what you're saying as an attack or judgement. Own your feelings, and show you're taking responsibility for them by using "I" statements.

Try to focus on behaviours and feelings that you're worried about rather than on eating and weight. Your teenager is more likely to recognise that they've been unhappy, withdrawn or miserable. They may be highly protective of the eating and associated behaviours.

Try to avoid

- Comments about appearance, weight or food.
- Naming other people who are also worried.
- Demanding change or berating your teenager.
- Power struggles.
- Tricking or forcing them to eat.
- Using labels or blaming statements ("you" statements). For example, avoid saying things like: "You are completely unreasonable", "You need help", "You aren't eating enough", "You are bulimic or anorexic", or "You have an eating disorder".





Use a different approach

- "I've heard you throwing up in the bathroom. I'm concerned for you. I'd like us to try to get some help."
- "I'm really concerned about this at the moment. I'm finding it hard to talk to you because we seem to end up fighting whenever I bring it up."
- "I'm very worried about you. You don't seem to be as happy any more. I'm concerned about how stressed you are and wonder how you are managing this. I'd like to be able to help you to get some help. Is there anything you'd like to talk to me about?"
- "I've noticed you seem really concerned about how you look and you seem to be giving yourself a pretty hard time at the moment. I don't see you enjoying being with your friends any more, or spending time doing things you used to enjoy. I think you deserve to feel better than you seem to have been feeling lately. I'd really like to help you feel better about yourself and would like us to try and get some help."

Don't expect to solve it straight away

Your teenager may be unwilling or not ready to talk. If this happens, remember that raising the subject has opened a door for further conversations. Try not to get caught up in power struggles about whether or not they have a problem. Try saying something like: "Even if I can't convince you to get help now, I can't stop caring."

Be patient and persistent, but be careful not to nag. Focus on the future, recovery and your willingness to help.

Your teenager may feel threatened by your discovery or observations. They may need some time to absorb what you've said and to respond. Listen to them and ask them to listen to you. Let them know that you've heard what they're saying.

Realise that they'll need to work at getting better at their own pace. You might want to say something like: "I understand that you might find facing this very difficult, and it takes a lot of courage to admit that something is not right. I'll be here for you when you're ready to accept my support and whenever you feel ready to talk."

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