

We asked: how do you talk about eating disorders?

In a recent piece of research, we found it takes almost three years, on average, between the onset of someone's eating disorder and the point that they seek help. Difficulty recognising that their symptoms are those of an eating disorder and lack of understanding and awareness in wider society means it can be hard for people to get treatment. But the sooner someone gets help for an eating disorder, the better their chance of a full and sustained recovery, so Beat focuses on getting people into treatment as quickly as possible.

Because so much of the gap before getting treatment comes before people seek treatment, we're looking at how we can shorten this time. By encouraging better understanding of eating disorders, we can help people feel safe to tell someone about what they're experiencing, and ensure the people around those suffering are able to see that there's something wrong earlier.

Having a conversation with someone about an eating disorder can be hard, whether you're worried about yourself or about someone else. But no matter which side of the conversation you're on, people who have had eating disorders and sought treatment have told us repeatedly that talking about it was the right thing to do, even if it was difficult at the time.

We asked people what they found helpful or unhelpful while talking about their eating disorder or raising the issue with someone they were worried about to help us produce guidance on how to have these important conversations. While every person is different, there were common threads in people's answers. Here you can see what people told us about their own experiences of talking about an eating disorder.

Just raising the issue is helpful

For many people who had been suffering with an eating disorder, it meant a lot that someone had realised there was something wrong. For those who brought it up themselves, often telling someone was a relief.

I found it helpful that someone cared enough to bring it up. – Anonymous

Feeling like there was someone there who cared and was willing to support me. Someone had noticed that I wasn't okay. – Anonymous, on what helped

I haven't told many people about my eating disorder, so it felt like a weight off my shoulders telling someone. – Anonymous

Before I felt alone, and because it was never spoken I could deny to myself that it was real, so their ability to name it also helped me take action. – Anonymous

Listening is key

Eating disorders are complex, and it often isn't possible to tell exactly what someone is experiencing and how they feel. Talking about it can be really hard, so it's important that people feel safe to say how they're feeling.

It's so important to listen and not judge the person... I was always scared to say that I had a problem for fear of being judged or not taken seriously. It is so important to be open, ask questions, and let the person know that they are supported. Even if you don't fully understand what is happening. – Anonymous

I asked the person to just listen to begin with, so I could explain without feeling pressured by responses/questions. – Anonymous

Just them letting me speak without passing judgement or interrupting, and asking questions so they could understand my situation as best as possible. It made me realise that they cared. – Clare, on what helped

People are more than their eating disorders

Sometimes people feel as though the eating disorder is a separate entity to themselves. Many people told us that they appreciated conversations that showed they were valued as a person, rather than focused on their eating.

On what helped:

Explaining that they were concerned about me, not talking about my size or calorie intake, but that they felt they were losing me as a person and friend. – Anonymous

Talking about my general mood and what has happened to me recently before talking about food or weight. – Jessica

Honesty and tackling [the eating disorder] as a separate thing to my daughter. – Sally

That I was treated normally and not patronised. People talked to me rather than my eating disorder. – Anonymous

It's not as simple as "just eating normally"

Eating disorders are mental illnesses – they aren't just about food; they're about feelings. Even if someone could "eat normally", that wouldn't mean the underlying issues would go away. By far the most frequent comment from the people we spoke to was that comments on eating and weight were not helpful.

On what was unhelpful:

Thinking they understood and just telling me to eat as it's easy. – Aimee

The almost bullying tactics that were used to try to force me to eat. It only made it worse. – Anonymous

Bringing up how I looked or my weight. When they were focusing on my happiness, it was a lot easier to understand the grip the eating disorder had on me. – Anonymous

...when people minimised things, e.g. telling me I looked okay or was not as bad as their friend had been... – Anonymous

With the right support, people can get better

Eating disorders are treatable illnesses. People can and do recover fully from eating disorders, and have a much better chance of doing so if they are treated early, and if they have a good support network who can help them on the path to recovery.

[The person who brought up the eating disorder] Offered to support and attend appointments with me, showing her emotion and concern. – Anonymous

It helped that they were gentle but persistent, not allowing me to brush their concerns away. They told me in a very direct way what they could see happening to me, expressed worry about me and asked how they could help... Anonymous

[My boss] took me away from the office and asked if I wanted to tell him anything... He supported me in attending over a year of outpatient appointments and I can't thank him enough for asking. – Anonymous

Having the support of friends made me realise I wasn't alone. – Anonymous

You can read our full guidance on how to have conversations about an eating disorder for [those concerned about themselves](#) and [those concerned about others](#). We hope this will help people to take that first step towards recovery.