

## Eating disorders: signs to notice and how to support someone



Worrying about someone's eating can feel confusing and upsetting. You might notice **small changes** and wonder if they mean anything at all. You may feel unsure whether to speak up, or worry about getting it wrong.

Eating problems do not always look the same. Many do not fit neatly into one label. In fact, the most common diagnosis is **OSFED**, where signs and behaviours vary and can change over time. Some people eat very little. Others binge, purge, avoid certain foods, or feel stuck in rigid routines around eating. Many feel deep shame and try hard to hide what is going on, even from those closest to them.

This guide is for anyone who is worried about someone they care about. It looks at a wide range of **signs to notice**, how eating problems can show up, and how to raise concerns with care. You do not need to be certain to care. Acting early, even when things feel unclear, can still help.

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## Why eating disorders can be hard to spot

Eating disorders do not always look the way people expect. They are not just about food, weight, or appearance. They are often about **control, stress, or how someone is coping**.

Many people work hard to hide what is going on. They may eat differently around others, make excuses to avoid meals, or keep parts of their life very private. Others may go through episodes of eating large amounts of food in secret, feel intense guilt or distress after eating, or use compensatory behaviours like vomiting or exercising excessively, all of which can easily be missed by those around them. Some people **appear high functioning** at work or school, which can make concerns easier to dismiss.

Changes often happen slowly. A shift in routines. More rules around food. Big swings in someone's appetite. More secrecy. More guilt, shame or self-blame expressed in relation to meals. Over time, these **changes can become normalised**, both by the person struggling and by those around them. It is also common for people to minimise their behaviour. They may say they are just trying to be healthy, that they need to get 'back on track' with their eating, reduce stress or save money. This does not mean your concern is misplaced. It means the situation is complex.

Trusting your instincts matters. If something feels off, it is **worth paying attention**, even if you cannot clearly name why yet.







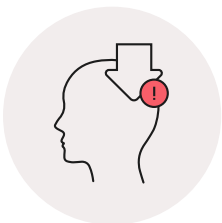
## Signs and changes to notice

Signs of an eating disorder are often about patterns and changes, rather than one clear behaviour. It is the shift from how someone used to be that matters most.



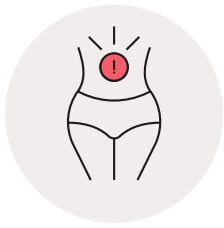
You might notice **changes around food**.

- Eating much more or much less than usual
- Increasing rules or routines around food
- Avoiding eating with others
- Eating large amounts of food quickly, especially when alone



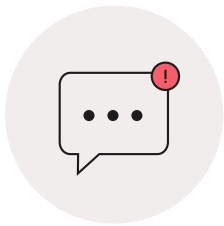
Feeling tense or overwhelmed around food and eating. There may also be **changes in mood or behaviour**.

- Increased irritability or withdrawal
- Strong guilt, shame or worry linked to eating
- Periods of feeling out of control, followed by being very controlled
- Tiredness, low energy or difficulty concentrating
- Avoiding social plans that involve food
- Going to the bathroom straight after meals
- Exercising despite tiredness



**Physical signs** can appear too, though they are not always obvious.

- Appetite changes or ongoing digestive discomfort
- Weight changes: loss, gain or frequent fluctuation
- Feeling faint, dizzy or unusually tired
- Changes in sleep, skin, hair or menstrual patterns
- Muscle aches, stomach pain or persistent bloating



Some people also **change how they talk about themselves**.

- More negative or self-critical comments about their body
- Saying things like having 'no control' or 'can't trust themselves' around food
- Talking about guilt or shame after eating
- Comparing themselves negatively to others
- Speaking about food, weight or exercise in extreme terms

Minimising concerns, for example 'I'm fine', 'I'm just being healthy'. You do not need to see all these signs for there to be a problem. A few changes that persist over time are enough to take seriously.

## What not to focus on

When you are worried about someone's eating, it is natural to look for clear proof. Weight, calories, or numbers can feel like something solid to hold on to. In reality, focusing on these often makes things harder.

**Weight alone does not tell you how someone is doing.** People can be unwell at any size. Commenting on weight, whether meant kindly or not, can increase shame and secrecy.

Trying to monitor food closely can also backfire. Asking what someone has eaten, checking portions, or pointing out changes can feel intrusive and controlling, even when concern is genuine. This can push the problem further underground.

Avoid making assumptions or labels. Saying things like "*you have an eating disorder*" can cause defensiveness or fear. It is more helpful to talk about what you have noticed and how it has made you feel concerned.

Focusing on care, not control, helps keep trust intact. The goal is to **open a conversation**, not to prove anything or force change before someone is ready.

## How to start a supportive conversation

Raising concerns about eating can feel daunting. You may worry about upsetting them or damaging the relationship. Starting gently makes a difference.

Try to choose a moment that feels calm and private. Avoid starting the conversation during meals or in front of other people.

Keep the focus on **what you have noticed**, not on what you think it means.

- *"I've noticed you seem more stressed around food lately."*
- *"I'm a bit worried because you don't seem yourself."*
- *"I wanted to check in and see how you're doing."*

Use "I" statements rather than "you" statements. This helps reduce defensiveness and keeps the conversation open.

You do not need to have answers or solutions. Listening matters more than saying the perfect thing. Let them **respond in their own time**, even if that means sitting with silence.

Starting the conversation does not mean everything has to change straight away. It means you have shown care and opened the door to further support.

As with most conditions, raising concerns early means support can start sooner and outcomes are often better. You do not need certainty or a diagnosis to speak up. How you speak up matters a great deal. Taking time to educate yourself, either by consulting a professional or accessing content from websites like the NHS or BEAT in the UK, and HSE and BodyWhys in the Republic of Ireland (IE) can equip you with the knowledge and tools to navigate a delicate conversation. It's also important to understand your own limits, both in terms of expertise and emotionally. You will be much more useful to the person you care about as a good listener, a gentle facilitator towards professional support, than if you were to assume responsibility for 'fixing' them.

The way we voice concern about food and eating reflects **how bodies are culturally judged**. Weight loss is often read as a reason for care, while weight gain is moralised and easily heard as criticism, even when concern is well meant. This is why **focusing on wellbeing** rather than weight or appearance helps people feel safer and less judged. Talking about changes in energy, mood, sleep, coping or social withdrawal works across eating disorders and avoids framing bodies as problems to fix.

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## What to say, and what to avoid

When someone is struggling with eating, words matter. Some comments, even when meant kindly, can increase shame or pressure.

### Helpful things to say focus on care and listening:

- *"I'm really glad you told me."*
- *"That sounds hard."*
- *"I'm here to listen if you want to talk."*
- *"You don't have to go through this on your own."*

### It also helps to ask open questions.

- *"How have things been feeling for you lately?"*
- *"What's been most difficult recently?"*

### Try to avoid comments that focus on **appearance, food, or control**.

- Avoid talking about weight or body shape.
- Avoid praising weight loss or changes in eating.
- Avoid telling them to *"just eat"* or *"try harder."*
- Avoid comparing their situation to others.

Advice given too quickly can feel like pressure. If you are unsure what to say, it is okay to say that. **Listening without fixing** is often the most supportive response.







## How to support without taking over

When you care about someone, it is natural to want to fix things. With eating disorders, taking control can sometimes make things worse, even when intentions are good.

Support works best when it respects the **other person's pace**. You can be present without monitoring every meal or behaviour. Being consistent, calm, and available often helps more than pushing for change.

### Ways to support without taking over include:

- Checking in regularly without focusing on food.
- Spending time together in ways that do not centre on eating.
- Letting them know you are there, even if they are not ready to talk.
- Keeping your reactions steady, even if you feel worried.

It is also important to **set your own limits**. Supporting someone does not mean putting your own needs aside completely. You cannot do this alone, and you are not meant to.

Being a **steady presence** can help someone feel less judged and more open to support when they are ready.

## When extra help may be needed

Support from friends or family can help, but it is not always enough on its own. Eating disorders can affect both physical and mental health, and early help matters.

It may be time to look for extra support if you notice that:

- changes around food or eating are getting stronger or more rigid
- mood or behaviour is changing more noticeably
- health seems to be affected, such as ongoing tiredness, dizziness, or frequent illness
- the person becomes more withdrawn or secretive
- conversations about concern go nowhere, or are shut down completely

You may also feel that the situation is starting to affect you. Constant **worry, stress, or feeling responsible** for keeping things under control are signs that you need support too.

Looking for help does not mean you have failed to support them. Eating disorders are complex and often need specialist care. Early input can reduce the risk of long-term harm and help recovery start sooner.







## Looking after yourself while supporting someone

Supporting someone with an eating disorder **can be draining**. You may feel anxious, helpless, or constantly on alert. These feelings are common, and they matter too.

It is important to remember that you did not cause this. You cannot control it. And you cannot fix it on your own. Holding yourself responsible can lead to burnout and resentment, even when your care is genuine.

### **Try to protect some space for yourself.**

- Talk to someone you trust about how you are coping.
- Keep up routines that help you rest and reset.
- Set limits around what you can and cannot manage.

If you start to feel overwhelmed, it is a sign that you need support as well. Looking after yourself does not take support away from the other person. It helps you stay steady and present over time.

You are allowed to care **without carrying everything alone**.

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## How HealthHero can help

If you are worried about someone's eating, you do not have to manage that concern alone. HealthHero can help you think through what you are seeing and what support might help next.

With HealthHero, you can book an online GP appointment at a time that suits you.

### **During the appointment, the doctor can:**

- listen to your concerns and the changes you have noticed
- help you understand whether the signs you are seeing may need further support
- talk through how to raise concerns again if the first conversation was difficult
- advise on next steps, including specialist support where needed

**HealthHero** can also help if you are supporting someone and finding it hard yourself. Talking things through with a professional can give reassurance, clarity, and a clearer sense of what you can and cannot carry on your own.

Getting support early can make a difference. You do not need to be certain or have all the answers to ask for help.