

RECOVERY SESSION:
TALKING WITH
FAMILY & FRIENDS



BODY BRAVE
recovery for **every** body

DISCLAIMER

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TALKING WITH FRIENDS AND FAMILY

No matter who we're talking with or the specifics of the conversation, talking with others about our mental health, and specifically mental illness, can be intimidating and feel overwhelming. There is no foolproof equation for how to navigate these conversations, but this handout explores a few tips, tricks, and tools to help us prepare.

Sharing about our concerns can help by:

- having loved ones provide support and encouragement - sometimes in the form of giving us more space
- minimizing the need for secrets or secretive behaviour in a relationship
- allowing us to further process our own mental health
- reduce the stigma around mental illness more generally
- normalize discussing mental health and wellness in our social circles or communities

"Sickness grows in the dark."

WHO SHOULD I TALK TO?

It would be amazing if everybody could be open and helpful when it comes to talking about mental illness or disordered eating. The reality is some relationships aren't built for these kinds of talks, and that's okay. Offering emotional support is not what everyone is comfortable with or knows how to do. There may be people you love and appreciate dearly, but who conversations about disordered eating and recovery may not be suitable for.

Start by making a list of the people you're considering talking to about your mental health concerns. Include the people you feel closest to, and list the most emotionally skilled people you know, even if you don't know them as well.

Consider:

- Is there anyone you've discussed mental health with before, or heard talking about mental health or other difficult subjects in a sensitive way?
- Is there anyone who might have some personal understanding of eating disorders or other mental health issues, and would be able to talk with you about what you're going through in a positive way?
- Is there anyone you've been able to confide in before?
- Is there anyone with whom someone else you know has discussed similar issues?

People You Might Consider Reaching Out To: partners, siblings, friends, parents, guardians, teachers, coaches, spiritual leaders, extended family members, community leaders.

When thinking over the pros and cons of telling someone, also consider the pros and cons of not telling them. What might happen to the relationship if you don't tell them about your concerns? Will telling them/not telling them possibly affect your ability to recover? The positives and negatives are different for everyone and thinking them through can help you decide what's right for you.

"Where talk exists, so does hope."

STARTING THE CONVERSATION

Preparation

Write it out

Before you talk to someone, you could prepare by writing down what you want to say. It might be helpful to think about:

- The thoughts and feelings affecting your eating, or other behaviour you're concerned about.
- How long the eating difficulties have been going on.
- What the person you're talking to could do to support you in getting appropriate help.

Plan the Logistics

If a chat in-person works for you, that's great! If it doesn't, you could write what you want to say and read it aloud, send the person an email, phone them, or send them a quick text/online message – remember that you have lots of options. Do what feels most comfortable to you. If planning a date/time in your mind as well to help you plan feels best, do that, even just mentally for yourself.

It's normal to feel scared at the idea of telling someone about your eating disorder. But we hear from so many people who say that, while it was difficult, it was also a big relief to have someone else know what they're going through.

Talk Through the Process

Sometimes it can be helpful to start the conversation by talking about the process, or "talking about talking," rather than jumping right into conversation. By doing this we can help prepare the other person for an important conversation by using "process" talk. You can begin process talk in lots of ways:

- "I want to talk to you about something important. I'm not sure how to talk about it, though. Can you just listen to me and try to understand? I'm hoping I'll feel better after talking about it with someone, but I need you to be patient."
- "There's something going on in my life that's bothering me. I think I need to talk to someone about it. I feel embarrassed about it, though, so please don't laugh it off or make a joke out of it."
- "I'm not sure if this will make sense. I feel uncomfortable talking about it, but I want to tell someone. Because of your knowledge, I'm hoping you'll be able to give me advice on what to do next for help."

TALKING ABOUT THE PROBLEM

Decide What to Share

Decide in advance what parts of your experience you'll talk about and what parts you won't. Stand by your decision. It's perfectly understandable to answer a question with a statement like "I'd rather not talk about that right now." You do not need to get into the details of specific behaviours, diagnoses, etc. **Big topics do not always need big conversations.**

Decide How to Frame Your Statement

If you're not comfortable talking specifically about disordered eating or eating habits, there are other things you may explore in conversation with a loved one that can help start the conversation about mental health without diving directly into disordered eating.

Examples:

- "I have some concerns about my mental health, I've been struggling with anxiety and having trouble sleeping. It's hurting my work and I feel out of control."
- "I've started skipping classes sometimes, and I haven't been able to focus on anything. I'm worried I'll stop leaving the apartment if I don't get help."
- "The doctor said my weight has fluctuated a lot. Sometimes I feel like things are getting out of control and I'm not sure how to keep myself together."

PREPARE FOR REACTIONS

If you've summoned the courage to tell someone how you're feeling and they aren't supportive, it can make you reluctant to tell anyone else. Don't take a poor reaction to mean you aren't struggling or your concerns aren't valid, that you don't deserve treatment, or were wrong to share. **How others react is not your fault.** The person may be surprised, shocked, upset, or worried. There is also often relief, as you may find that your family or friends have been worried about you but have felt unable to approach you.

RECOVERY SESSION: TALKING WITH FRIENDS AND FAMILY



If you'd still like to speak with that person, this door isn't necessarily closed – they may be reacting out of fear, shock, or confusion, and be more willing to talk once they've moved past this initial response. You could consider directing them to some more information so they can learn more.

However, you deserve help and support now, and you shouldn't have to spend all your time and energy convincing someone if it doesn't feel like they're listening to you. Think about whether there's someone else you can talk to – remember, if one person reacts badly, that does not mean the next person will.

"Never let your ego get in the way of asking for help when in desperate need. We have all been helped at a point in our lives."

- EDMOND MBIAKA.

LET THEM KNOW HOW THEY CAN HELP

Everyone has different needs, and different people respond in different ways. Think about your needs ahead of time, and about whether this person can support you, if there are resources that would help them understand what you're going through, or if they say no. Some people may not be able to handle disclosure, so it may be difficult to expect support from them. However, there are many people who will probably feel honoured that you shared this with them, and whom will be happy to do what they can.

Examples:

- "I'm scared to make an appointment because that's like admitting there's something wrong. But I need to see a doctor. Can you help me find one and follow through?"
- "I'm not thinking clearly these days. I'm getting treatment for disordered eating, but it might take a while to feel right. Until then, when I do something that makes you uncomfortable, can you please tell me what I'm doing instead of getting freaked out?"
- "I'm not supposed to drink alcohol with my medications. I'm going to try not to drink at parties, but I need my close friends to encourage me and help me keep my social life."
- "I'm feeling better. But once in a while, can you tell me you're there for me and give me a hug?"

TEMPLATES FOR WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

Written Letter

Use the letter below and fill in the blanks. Pick from the options we've listed or use your own words.

Dear _____,

For the past (day/week/month/year/ _____), **I have been feeling** (unlike myself/sad/angry/anxious/moody/agitated/lonely/hopeless/fearful/overwhelmed/distracted/confused/stressed/empty/restless/unable to function or get out of bed/ _____).

I have struggled with (changes in appetite/changes in weight/loss of interest in things I used to enjoy/ hearing things that were not there/seeing things that were not there/ feeling unsure if things are real or not real/ my brain playing tricks on me/ lack of energy/increased energy/ inability to concentrate/alcohol or drug use or abuse/self-harm/skipping meals/overeating/overwhelming focus on weight or appearance/feeling worthless/ uncontrollable thoughts/guilt/paranoia/nightmares/ bullying/not sleeping enough/ sleeping too much/risky sexual behaviour/overwhelming sadness/losing friends/unhealthy friendships/unexplained anger or rage/isolation/ feeling detached from my body/feeling out of control/ thoughts of self-harm/cutting/thoughts of suicide/plans of suicide/abuse/sexual assault/death of a loved one/ _____).

Telling you this makes me feel (nervous/anxious/hopeful/embarrassed/empowered/pro-active/mature/self-conscious/guilty/ _____), **but I'm telling you this because** (I'm worried about myself/it is impacting my schoolwork/it is impacting my friendships/I am afraid/I don't want to feel like this/I don't know what to do/I don't have anyone else to talk to about this/I trust you/ _____).

I would like to (talk to a doctor or therapist/talk to a guidance counselor/talk to my teachers/talk about this later/create a plan to get better/talk about this more/find a support group/ _____) **and I need your help.**

Sincerely,
(Your name _____)

Text

'Hey guys, this really isn't something I want to talk about, but I have had some issues with (...eating, sleeping, my appetite, my body image, etc) lately and I'm currently (...seeing a therapist, looking for professional support, talking to my doctor about it, etc). I really don't want to answer any questions, but just wanted communicate some boundaries I've found to be really important for me. Moving forward I'm wondering if we could limit, (... commenting on food, portion sizes, exercise habits, weight, body, etc). Hopefully, this will be over soon, but as of right now I just wanted you to know. Love you guys and thanks for always being supportive!'

JOURNAL PROMPTS

- How does my self-confidence impact the way I communicate?
- How do you like others to communication hard things with you?
- How do I normally respond to conflict or hard conversations? How do I wish I responded to these things?
- How do I want someone to support me?
- If someone knows about my eating disorder, how do I want them to treat me?
- What boundaries would I want to set with someone who knows about my eating disorder? (no advice, etc)
- Write a letter telling yourself about your disordered eating concerns.

★ *Time to Reflect:*

What are my hesitations when it comes to talking to someone about disordered eating?

FURTHER LEARNING

Podcasts

[How to Begin Talking About Your Mental Health](#)

[The Value of Friendship in Eating Disorder Recovery](#)

Videos

[Brene Brown - The Power of Vulnerability](#)

Reading

[5 Tips for Talking About Your Mental Health](#)

[Sharing Concerns About Your Eating Behaviour](#)

[Time to Talk, Talking to your Parents](#)

[To Anyone Who's Struggling, But Afraid to Reach Out for Help](#)

[How to Ask for Help from People You Respect](#)

[10 Ways to "Reach Out" When You're Struggling with Your Mental Health](#)

[Think You Have an Eating Disorder? This Is How To Talk To Your Doctor About Your Eating Disorder](#)

[How to Help Others Help You On The Road to Eating Disorder Recovery](#)