

Conversations with People and Their Eating Disorder

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Talking with a person who has an eating disorder might look different than other conversations. For instance, using words that directly reference appearance can be triggering for those with eating disorders. It has been shown that women with eating disorders spend longer time focusing on words that deal with appearance in comparison to women who do not meet the criteria for an eating disorder (Myers, Ridolfi, & Crowther, 2015). While in everyday conversation you may not notice certain phrases as triggering, people with eating disorders are more sensitive to the type of language directed at them in conversation.

A person with disordered eating may experience an “eating disorder voice” taking over the true identity of the person. It’s helpful to identify these two, conflicting selves. When engaging in conversation, addressing both “selves” or “voices” can help you discern who it is you are really speaking to.

When talking with a loved one who seems hostile, don’t let the “eating disorder voice” control the conversation. Try to remember that the person to whom you are speaking with is struggling with an internal battle that may cause them to be defensive. The goal for quality conversation with a person who has an eating disorder is to speak to their true self. Use empathy, patience, and love to speak to the voice that wants to recover. Although you may be feeling overwhelmed, the eating disorder voice can thrive off of this fear and turn it into your loved one feeling persecuted. It is best to have a conversation after you have prepared yourself and are in a good place emotionally.

Choosing certain words or statements over others might seem miniscule, but it can actually make a big difference in patient recovery. According to the American Psychiatric Association (APA),

“[Treatment for an eating disorder]... involves interrupting behaviors that have become driven and compelling. Recovery takes a team, which includes family, friends and other social supports, as well as medical and mental health professionals. Be empathic, but clear. List signs or behaviors you have noticed and are concerned about. Help locate a treatment provider and offer to go with your friend or relative to an evaluation. Be prepared that the affected individual may be uncertain about seeking treatment.”

Here are some general tips on how to have conversations about food, body, and concerns with a patient or loved one who has an eating disorder.

AVOID	USE
<p>Assumptions</p> <p>Ex) “You have an eating disorder.”</p>	<p>Affirmations</p> <p>Ex) “I am here to love and support you.”</p>
<p>Using “you” and “we” statements</p> <p>Ex) “Don’t you see how bad you’re becoming?”</p>	<p>“I” statements</p> <p>Ex) “I’m concerned for you.”</p>
<p>Placing blame or criticism on any individual</p> <p>Ex) “You’re just being dramatic.” “Why are you doing this to me?”</p>	<p>Remain patient and offer encouragement</p> <p>Ex) “I may not understand what you are going through, but I’m so proud of you for fighting this.”</p>
<p>Focusing on appearance</p> <p>Ex) “You look too thin.”</p>	<p>Focus on personality traits</p> <p>Ex) “You make me laugh like no one else does.”</p>
<p>Becoming their therapist</p> <p>Ex) Being their only source of support enables them from getting professional help.</p>	<p>Encourage seeking treatment</p> <p>Ex) “I want someone who is properly trained to help too, so that you can get the best treatment possible.”</p>
<p>Neglecting your needs</p> <p>Ex) Losing sleep. Missing doctor’s appointments. Using all of your energy on another person.</p>	<p>Take care of yourself</p> <p>Ex) Breathe. Go to a movie. See a therapist for yourself. Focus on what YOU need.</p>

References

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