

EATING DISORDERS

Talking to your teenager about his or her eating disorder

Should you do something?

A number of eating problems in teenage years are short lived. Just as trying to encourage a young child to eat their greens or limiting sweets and crisps may have been a phase in growing up, your teenager may decide to go on a diet, eat only certain types of food and not join in family meals. Concern over appearance and a fight for independence is normal in teenage years and you don't want to create a problem when there isn't one.

However, if your teenager seems too extreme in their behaviour so that a 'normal' diet is now leading to ongoing and concerning weight loss, if there is a marked change in eating behaviour whether it's the type of food, quantity or how it's eaten, if you suspect your teenager of throwing up, if you think they may be bingeing, if you note very variable changes in weight, if there is a developing obsession with exercise, then it's time to take action. Left untreated, eating disorders can lead to chronic health problems, depression and even death.

Getting together

It is more effective if you and your spouse (if there are two parents) agree that there is a problem. If this is not possible, the more concerned parents should take the lead in moving things forward as soon as possible.

The nature of an eating disorder is to pit parents against their children. This is because the 'benefits' of the eating disorder are so valued by the person who has it that they become fiercely protective of guarding it, bringing about debate and defence.

Your task therefore is to find ways of working with your teenager in beating the condition.

It will help you to understand the nature of eating disorders (read the section for parents in the **stem4** website (www.stem4.org.uk) and to keep in mind that thinking is altered when someone has an eating disorder. These altered thoughts are very firmly entrenched and need patience and a new understanding.

This means that what may seem clear to you 'why not just eat it, it's so easy?' or 'putting a teaspoon of salad dressing won't cause immediate weight gain' is not clear to your teenager.

**Separate the illness from your teenager.
Try not to blame your teenager for their eating disorder.**

Talking to your teenager

Be clear, find some private time and state your concerns clearly.
For example: 'We have noticed that you have found it much harder to maintain your weight/join us for family meals/stop the diet you started a few months ago . . . and would like to discuss this with you.' **Resistance to help is part of the condition so your teenager may deny this.**

Persist

For example: 'There seems to be a difference in how we perceive things and how you do and we would like to work on this difference.'

Your goal is to;

1. Raise awareness that something is not right.
2. Be clear that you intend to help make a change.
3. You want to hear their view. Once you establish a discussion, keep this going. Nothing resolves quickly.
4. Your next goal is to get a physical assessment and you need to discuss this with your teenager. 'To make sure that you are physically well, we will be making an appointment with our GP to get you a health check and would like to arrange that appointment as soon as they can fit us in.'

Low self-esteem

Low self-esteem is a crucial issue in eating disorders. Although the focus of your teenager may be totally on food, shape and weight, this is usually because they have a poor view of themselves. So, your teenager may think 'I am a failure and controlling my weight is the only area I am succeeding at the moment,' whilst you may think 'you are so clever and attractive, why are you being so difficult in letting go of something that is wrong?'

This is another form of altered thinking and continuing discussion about the difference between their thoughts and how you and others perceive them is an important factor.

In summary, the first steps are;

1. To raise awareness.
2. To recognise that an eating disorder creates a disorder in thinking and that there is a difference in perception between your teenage and yourself/others.
3. To establish a joint working alliance.
4. To persist.
5. To understand that low self-esteem is a root cause of the condition.