

Bringing it Out Into the Open

How to Approach an Eating Disorder

You've suspected that a loved one is struggling with eating disordered issues for a while and you think you have observed enough evidence to prove that this is the case. But what do you do? How do you confront her? Will she be mad or deny your concerns? Here are some helpful hints for approaching this subject that is so touchy and unnerving for many people to discuss.

Who is Going to Break the Ice?

If you are concerned as a family or as a group of her friends, come to an agreement together as to who will be the best person to break the ice about the behaviours you have observed. The person closest to her, that she connects well with, and trusts would be the best candidate for the job.

When is the Ideal Time to Do So?

Pick a time when you feel calm and when neither of you will be interrupted. This will allow you both to feel more relaxed and not rushed through the conversation.

What do I Say?

Consider writing down what you need to say ahead of time, that way you won't forget what you have planned to say in the heat of the moment. Things that you might want to say include:

- **What's worrying you.** Let her know what you have observed.
- **How you feel about it.** Let her know that you are worried about her.
- **Why you wanted to bring this up.** Let her know you want to be there to support her whenever she needs it. You want to change the way that the disordered eating is affecting you and her, and you want to make sure she gets the necessary help.

Allow her to speak, without interruptions, and voice her own questions and concerns. Let her cry if she needs to. The most important thing that you want to communicate to her is that you are concerned about her health and well being and that you will be there for her if and when she needs support.

Be prepared for different responses. You might encounter a negative reaction to bringing up the topic. Perhaps she is still in denial herself and is not ready to talk about it or to enter treatment. Yet if she is ready to receive treatment she will most likely be relieved that someone has noticed and cares about her.

Greetings!

Happy New Year! Welcome to 2004. To ring in the New Year we thought we'd go back to the basics and publish the first newsletter of 2004 aimed at helping family and friends of those suffering from eating disorders. Often family and friends feel helpless when it comes to an eating disorder, so we've put together some tips on bringing it out in the open and dealing with the issues involved.

Whether you are a mother, father, sister, brother, friend, coach, teacher, or sufferer yourself we hope that you will find some guidance in this issue of Recovery!

We trust that you had a very Merry Christmas filled with family, friends and joyous memories. We wish you all the best in the fresh New Year to come!

Lynne Robertson

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**Man can live about
forty days without
food,

about three days
without water,

about eight minutes
without air

...but only for one
second without hope.**

Hal Lindsey

This newsletter is a publication of the Westwind eating disorder recovery centre, and is intended for general information only. It is not intended to provide personal medical or psychological advice, which should be obtained from a qualified health professional.

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More information about Westwind can be obtained by calling 204-728-2499, or call toll free in North America at 1-888-353-3372. Check out our web site at : www.westwind.mb.ca, or e-mail us at westwindedrc@mb.sympatico.ca. We are located at 458-14th St, Brandon, MB, R7A 4T3, Canada.

Confronting Someone You Suspect Might Have an Eating Disorder For Teachers and Coaches

As times change, rules and regulations change. It seems that in schools these days teachers must be much more cautious of their actions and words around students. So, as a teacher or coach, how would you go about confronting a student you suspect is suffering from an eating disorder? Here are some guidelines for teachers and coaches to approaching a possible case of an eating disorder in an appropriate manner.

- Address the issue with the person somewhat privately. Ensure that she feels comfortable speaking with you, if not, you might want to have another teacher, whom she may feel more comfortable with, involved.
- Plan very carefully what you will say. Students may be very fragile, so take a caring and concerned approach, not an accusing approach! Indicate what you have observed in relation to the eating disordered behaviour and let her know that you are concerned for her health.



- Let her respond without interruption. Listen carefully with empathy for her. This is probably one of the most difficult situations she will encounter in her life. Be non-judgmental.

- Don't become her therapist, saviour, or victim. Simply express your concern for her, suggest that she explore treatment and provide her with professional resources.

- Avoid arguments or a battle of wills. If the conversation becomes an argument, perhaps you might want to postpone the conversation until a later time when you both have had time to think things through.

- Decide with the student what will happen next. Will she take the steps to treatment, explore some of the available resources, or wait until she feels ready? Let her know that her participation in school, sports and activities won't be jeopardized unless her health is compromised to a dangerous level.



- Inform the family. Let them know that, based on your observations, you spoke briefly with their daughter and you want to, together with the family, take a "let's find out approach".



Help!

She Has an Eating Disorder

Pointers for Family and Friends

So she has an eating disorder. Perhaps she broke down and told you, out of helplessness, or maybe you've noticed odd food behaviours and suspected an eating disorder now for a while. All sorts of questions are running through your mind. "Why?" "How?" And, "What are we going to do?"

One of the first questions you are going to ask yourself is, "How can I help her through this rough time?" Whether you are a loving parent, sibling, relative, or friend you are most likely going to be concerned for her health and well being, and want to help her as much as you can. This isn't going to be the easiest road you have ever travelled. Prepare to be worried, frustrated and sometimes feel helpless. Here are some helpful hints for you that will make dealing with an eating disorder a little easier.

- Before you do anything, begin to educate yourself on the subject of eating disorders. Talk to an eating disorder therapist, surf the net, or search your local library for a better understanding of what the issues of eating disorders really are. This will help you develop some insight into what your loved one is going through.
- Ultimately, you have no control over her or her behaviour or reaction to attempts at helping her. What you do have control over, however, is how you respond, behave and allow the eating disorder to affect you. If she is over the age of 18 she can choose to receive therapy or not. Rather than forcing her into treatment it is more effective to express your concerns, point out the dangers of eating disorders, and provide her with resources. Allowing her to enter treatment when she is ready will give her ownership of her recovery, whereas forcing her into treatment will only cause power struggles and conflict.
- Allow yourself not to know all the answers. It's okay not to know all the reasons and explanations. Realize that you are trying to do your best in a situation that is extremely difficult.
- Don't let life revolve around the eating disordered person or her behaviours. Avoid making her feel guilty and responsible for the welfare of the rest of the family or her group of friends. Though she might insist that she be responsible for planning and preparing meals, ensure that others are able to make suggestions and voice their opinions as well. When it comes to socializing, most activities and events involve food, which will more than likely be a difficult situation for the eating disordered person. Try to develop ways of sharing and socializing that don't involve food.

- She should be responsible for her actions and the resulting consequences. It is her responsibility to replace what she has binged on, and to clean up after an episode in the bathroom, etc. This will help her deal with the reality of her disorder rather than punish her for her eating disordered behaviour.

- Focus on qualities of the individual that are independent of appearance, weight, shape or size. Share with her the qualities of her personality and character that you admire.

- If she has lost a great deal of weight and you become concerned about medical stability, consult with a physician who is knowledgeable about eating disorders for information, advice and suggestions. If she is seeing a therapist, contact him or her with any concerns. Ensure that she visits a physician for a check up, as even those who are not underweight can be medically unstable due to purging or laxative abuse, etc.

- She is not the only one who can benefit from therapy; a counsellor or support group can help family members and friends deal with the effect of the eating disorder upon themselves and also find support in others who are experiencing the same type of situation. The lessons you can learn and the comfort to be gained from others is invaluable.

- Don't demand weight gain, or argue over food and weight, this may lead to conflict. Even though food and weight seem to be the most predominant problem with eating disorders, the issues in fact lie deeper inside the person. It is best to avoid commenting on shape, size, appearance, or food.

- An important tip to remember is to

practice being a good role model. Examine the way you feel about your body and how you react to the bodies of others. Are you setting a good example? Practice common sense by not going on diets, but instead eating healthfully and participating in regular exercise.

- Be sure to continue providing your support emotionally and psychologically. Treat her just as you did before you discovered the eating disorder, by continuing to verbally and physically express honest love and affection for her. Show your feelings; it's okay to admit that you sometimes feel angry, frustrated, helpless, afraid, powerless and hopeless.

What's New at Westwind?

Eating Disorder Awareness Week

February 1-8th marks Eating Disorder Awareness Week 2004. We have a number of activities planned for the Brandon area, including information displays and interviews. Find out what your community is doing for this important event and get involved!

Eating Disorder Conference

Westwind is planning on hosting an international conference on eating disorders in the winter of 2005. If you would like to be involved please contact us at 204-728-2499. Keep looking for more information in the near future.

Westwind Reunion

We are planning another Westwind Reunion for clients in August of 2004. Let us know if you are interested and please call us with your ideas!

Eating Disorder Support Groups

Support Groups are held every Monday evening at 7pm at Westwind. Join us on-line at <http://groups.msn.com/westwindeatingdisordersupportgroup>.

"But I'm Just Her Dad?" What Dads Can Do

Fathers often feel cast aside or left out of the loop when it comes to problems their teenage daughters are encountering. These are trying years for both father and daughter, and as the daughter experiences the changes of adolescence, the father withdraws as he is unsure as to what his role is. But this is not the best solution, read on to find out what might be.

- All men can contribute to the health of young women by learning about eating disorders and trying to understand the issues surrounding them. Examine how you treat all women including your mother and your wife. Explore some of the pressures women feel to be attractive to please those around her.
- Set a good example by showing respect for all women. What messages are you sending to your daughter about weight, beauty and body image? How do you feel about your own body? Try to set a good example for her.
- Sometimes we treat our sons differently than our daughters making girls feel like they are less important. Make sure that you are giving your daughter the same attention, opportunities and encouragement that you would give a boy. Also, have siblings share household responsibilities. Don't categorize certain chores as women's work and others as men's.
- Last, but most definitely not least, accept how important you are to your daughter. She is going through a very difficult time in her life and desperately needs your approval and attention, but

she's not sure how to go about doing so. Listen to her concerns and questions, and show respect, continued trust, approval, and unconditional love towards her.

For more information about what Dad's can do visit the Dad's and Daughters website at www.dadsanddaughters.org.



The Food Problems Oh What to Do?

Time and time again we will be told, and we will read, that eating disorders are not about food. But, food is a huge part of the equation. How do we go about dealing with it? We can't walk around on eggshells forever. What is the best way to deal with the binge eating, restricting, purging and obsessions with weight that we encounter every day?

What you need to do is disengage yourself from the eating disorder. What are the reasons that you have stayed involved? Examine the pros and cons. Look at moving into a healthier relationship with the eating disordered person, again examine the pros and cons. Obviously there are more pros to developing a healthier relationship!

We all know that our intentions are good when it comes to dealing with the food issues of an eating disorder, but often times attempts to control the behaviour only makes the problem worse. Disentangle yourself from the food issues by recognizing your own limitations and accepting them. The eating disordered person is responsible for her own behaviours, no one else is. She needs to deal with it when it affects others. No matter how hard you try to you cannot change anyone else's behaviour, the only person you have control over is yourself.

You will have to come up with a solution to the food problems that respects the rights of everyone else in the household. You don't have to abandon your old lifestyle when disengaging from the eating disorder. Rather, come up with a plan, as a group, as to how you are going to deal with the binge eating, purging and restricting. Perhaps you each want to buy your own food if you are roommates, or in the case of a family, meals and groceries could be purchased as before, but each individual has their own snack foods which are off limits to each other. The eating disordered person is responsible for replacing food she has binged on. As a household, be willing to negotiate household chores involving food.

Don't make certain food exceptions for the eating disordered person. Don't avoid purchasing or purchase specific foods solely to accommodate the eating disorder. Each person should decide on their own what they will or won't eat, and not feel influenced by the eating disordered person. Don't let mealtimes be a battlefield, it will only perpetuate the problem.



Again, accept that you ultimately have no control over the person. They have every right to live their life the way they choose to. You cannot change them, but you can change the way this behaviour affects you, and be a positive influence, but it is ultimately up to them how they choose to live their life.

Coming "Out of the Closet" Telling Someone About Your Eating Disorder

Telling someone that you have an eating disorder can be a stressful thing to have to do. Just thinking about putting yourself into that vulnerable position can be a scary thought. Chances are many of your family and friends will already know, or at least suspect, that you are struggling with some sort of disordered eating, but some will not have picked up on the behaviour or are just unaware of the signs and symptoms. Most likely, at some point in your life, a time will come when you feel the need, and feel ready, to tell some of your friends or family that you have an eating disorder. But how? what do you say to them? How do you bring it up? Here are some tips for you to help make "coming out of the closet" a little easier.

- Only tell people when you are ready to do so, and when you feel comfortable doing so.
- Choose an appropriate place and time.
- Tell the person that you have something important to tell them, and that it is difficult for you to talk about, but you feel you need to be honest with them.
- Bring information hand outs on eating disorders if you think they might have questions.
- If you don't think you are going to be able to tell them in person, you could write a letter instead.
- Express that you have been struggling with issues surrounding food and weight, and have developed an eating disorder.
- Let them think about what you have

said and respond if they would like to.

- Follow by letting them know that you are seeking counselling, if you are, and slowly working through recovery. Let them know that an eating disorder is a behaviour that takes years to develop and will likely take years to recover from.

- Ask them to treat you no differently than before.

You might receive mixed reactions from some people. Some might be afraid to approach the subject, some will be very caring and supportive, and some might try to take control over your disorder. If you do encounter a negative reaction, try not to take it too personally. All you have done is confided in them an issue that you are struggling with, and you have no control over their reaction to it. Ask them to treat you as they did before, but also understand that you are sensitive to comments about weight and food. If they can't respect that, then perhaps you should re-evaluate your friendship with them. Do you really need a friend who makes you feel bad about yourself because you are struggling with an eating disorder? People who are important to you in your life and really care about you will support you throughout your recovery.

For simplicity we have used "she" in reference to the sufferers of eating disorders throughout these articles.

References for this newsletter

Brisman, J., Siegel, M., Weinschel, M. (1997) *Surviving an Eating Disorder: Strategies for Family and Friends*. HarperPerennial. New York, NY.

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