

Guidelines for Helping A Student

Prepare yourself for your talk. Gather general information before you talk to the student. Find out about the resources for help in your school and community without revealing the identity of the student. Speak in an anonymous way with the school nurse/physician, health educator and administration to find out if there is any school policy about students with eating disorders (such policies are more likely to be in place at boarding schools). Find out what the ramifications might be for participation in classes and sports. Read about eating disorders if you need more information. Always talk privately with her before letting others know about the student by name, even if you strongly believe she is at risk. You can bring in other individuals later, but you risk the student's trust if you talk about her without her knowing.

Do other students know? The student you approach may want to know whether you noticed her or whether other students came to you about her. If other students do come to you, discuss with them whether they want their conversation with you to be confidential. You need to respect their request and reassure them that they did the right thing by communicating their concern. Tell them that you will follow through on their approach to you and put their concern in the hands of responsible adults who will do their best to help. Check to see if any student who approaches you is also worried about herself, and offer her the same kind of advice. Avoid getting involved in long talks with the concerned students about the at-risk student.

Plan with care. It is best to be able to offer your student a strategy for securing help. Locate a quiet, safe, and private place to talk. Plan ahead so you'll have the amount of time you'll need to talk and be sure that you won't be interrupted or overheard. Begin by telling the student that you are concerned about her and gently offer some specific observations about her emotional well being or lack thereof. For example: "You seem (really) unhappy and preoccupied/anxious/fidgety/distant/jumpy/angry, and I'm worried about you." If her performance has dropped in class or sports, give her specific observations. For example: "You don't seem to be having any fun anymore, you're pushing yourself too hard, you don't raise your hand anymore, you're working out so hard that it looks like you might be injuring yourself, your energy's depleted, your grades are dropping." As you talk, communicate about what is going on inside her. Listen to what she says without making any judgments, interpretations or promises that you will get very involved in her recovery.

Offer a few observations about her behavior to explain why you think she has an eating disorder. For example, "I see you skip meals, I watch you leave class and run to the bathroom, I hear you talk all the time about being afraid of being fat, what you ate, how much you're going to exercise, etc." Don't try to make a diagnosis or do therapy. Do let her know that you have some sense that she may have an eating disorder and she needs to get help to evaluate this. If you have found out your school policy concerning participation in sports, let her know it in the most reassuring way possible. "As far as I know, our school has a policy that you will still be able to play sports and do all activities unless participating would be dangerous to you."

Your student may feel threatened by your discovery or observations. She may deny that she has a problem or get upset. If she gets upset or mad, stay calm. Don't panic or get angry. Don't get into a "Yes you do/ No I don't " power struggle here. Give her space to respond, listen to her and ask her to listen to you. Remind her that teachers tell students when they are worried about them. If she insists that she doesn't have a problem, or she can stop on her own, you can say something like, "You know how it is with alcoholism and denial. The addiction makes it hard to see you have a serious problem and that you need help. I'm worried you're trapped in a similar kind of situation. I'm really worried about you, and even though I hear what you're saying, I think you are really struggling and you need help stopping. I believe in you and I know you deserve to get help and get better." If she has tried to get better on her own and hasn't succeeded and is ashamed, let her know that it is very hard to recover without help and that this is not a weakness or failure on her part. You may need to approach a student more than once before she will agree to get help.

Offer the name of a referral and offer to go with her if you feel comfortable doing so. Let the student know you'll touch base with her to follow up. Ask if it's okay for you to let the referral person know to expect to be hearing from her. In a few days, or whatever seems to be the right amount of time, check in with the student and ask if she contacted the person. Follow up with the referral person and then continue to be supportive of the student as you would with any other student. Avoid comments about food, exercise, or appearance.

If she refuses help, tell her again the specifics of why you are concerned, and if needed, your belief that something further must be done. Don't prolong a conversation that is going poorly. Do get consultation from a professional. Depending on what the professional says, the age of the student, and the degree of risk, you may decide to approach the student again and tell her that you talked to the professional. Stay calm and avoid sounding like your mission is to rescue or cure her, but also let her know you are concerned that she has a serious problem and it would be irresponsible for you not to try to help. Eating disorders are serious physical and psychological problems, but not usually emergencies. However, if your student is fainting, depressed, suicidal, or otherwise in serious danger, get professional help immediately. "I don't care if you're mad at me. Teachers don't let students suffer in danger and isolation."