



**HEALTHIER MINDS** 

# Eating Problems and Eating Disorders

## A Guide for Parents and Carers



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## **INTRODUCTION**

This guide is written for parents and carers of children and young people who are affected by eating problems or an eating disorder. It is intended as a useful reference guide when supporting your child. It also contains helpful links to further resources and services that may be able to offer support.

We recognised that there were more and more young people having problems with their eating. We have worked with young people, their families and professionals such as Social Workers, Educational Psychologists, School Nurses and a CAMHS Nurse Therapist to write this guidance to help you. We also have guidance specifically for young people and professionals so that people know how you can get the best support possible.

*Children and young people can be affected by eating problems at any age but for the purposes of this document we will use the term 'young person' or 'young people' as they are more common during adolescence.*

### **What Young People and Families Told Us**

We asked young people who have been affected by an eating disorder and their families to tell us what was important to them in their recovery. Young people told us that they would like more time to talk through their concerns and behaviours with a trusted adult. They would also like to focus on other important areas of their life and be supported to develop other interests which would distract them from their eating problems. While young people appreciated the opportunity to meet with a range of professionals, having as few people as possible at formal meetings was less overwhelming for the young person.

Parents and carers told us that they would like much more information and support when eating problems are first identified to avoid the situation escalating to crisis point. Connecting with other parents in a similar situation is helpful. They also told us that it was important for professionals to see their child as more than just their illness.

Young people and families agreed that clarity around the role of each professional is crucial as well as clear communication between agencies to ensure information is shared and plans are joined up.

## **WHAT ARE EATING PROBLEMS AND EATING DISORDERS?**

Eating problems are described by the mental health charity ['Mind'](#) as 'any relationship with food that you find difficult'. Eating disorders is the term used for clinically diagnosed problems. A diagnosis is based on eating patterns and medically assessed weight, blood and body mass index.

Food plays an important part in our lives and our eating habits can change. Sometimes we may try to eat more healthily, we may eat more than usual or lose our appetite. Changing our eating habits every now and again is normal. However it becomes problematic when someone starts to focus a lot on controlling what or how much they eat; when food and eating feels like it's taking over their life; or when they have worries and concerns which are having an impact on their eating behaviours. Eating disorders are serious mental illnesses affecting people of all ages, genders, ethnicities and backgrounds.

**It's important to remember that eating disorders are not all about food itself, but about feelings. The way the person treats food may make them feel more able to cope, or may make them feel in control, though they might not be aware of the purpose this behaviour is serving. An eating disorder is never the fault of the person experiencing it, and anyone who has an eating disorder deserves fast, compassionate support to help them get better.**

As a parent or carer, it is important to remember is that your loved one's eating problems are **not** your fault.

The [Beat Eating Disorders](#) website provides the following definitions for types of eating disorders:

- **Anorexia** or *anorexia nervosa* is a serious mental illness where people are of low weight due to limiting how much they eat and drink. They may develop "rules" around what they feel they can and cannot eat, as well as things like when and where they'll eat.
- **Avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder (ARFID)** is a condition characterised by the person avoiding certain foods or types of food, having restricted intake in terms of overall amount eaten, or both.
- **Binge eating disorder (BED)** is a serious mental illness where people eat very large quantities of food without feeling like they're in control of what they're doing.
- **Bulimia** or *bulimia nervosa* is characterised by a cycle of eating large quantities of food (called bingeing), and then trying to compensate for that overeating by vomiting, taking laxatives or diuretics, fasting, or exercising excessively (called purging).
- **Other specified feeding or eating disorder (OSFED):** Sometimes a person's eating behaviours don't exactly fit those expected for any of the above eating disorders. In that case, they might be diagnosed with an "**other specified feeding or eating disorder**" (OSFED).

## Spotting the Signs

There are a number of changes you might notice in your child's behaviour which makes you concerned about their eating. These are some of the most common things you might notice:

- Social isolation
- Avoiding / self-conscious about eating around others
- Difficulty concentrating
- Tiredness
- Irritability
- Low confidence and self-esteem
- Anxiety
- Obsessive and/or rigid behaviour (e.g. restricted foods, specific times for eating)
- Perfectionism and setting unreasonably high personal standards
- Self-harm
- Changes to weight – gaining, losing or fluctuating weight
- Avoiding physical exercise
- Exercising excessively
- Covering up body parts
- Eating when not hungry

## EATING DISORDERS AND COVID-19

The Coronavirus pandemic and subsequent restrictions have had a significant impact on the mental health and wellbeing of many people. Young people have been particularly affected by limited social contact, health fears and school closures. The incidence and severity of eating disorders have increased over the course of the pandemic with eating disorder organisations such as BEAT reporting a rise in young people seeking support and a reported increase in referrals to specialist NHS services for concerns relating to eating problems.

The pandemic has brought, for many, increased anxiety, a reduced sense of control, a loss of normal day to day activities which keep us mentally and physically healthy, and increased uncertainty about the future. Eating problems and other mental health concerns emerged or worsened as young people faced this ever changing landscape. Restrictions also meant families spending more time together. For some young people, the increased time at home enabled family members to recognise the difficulties their child was experiencing and ultimately led to families seeking help. However, for other young people the pandemic and restrictions have exacerbated symptoms as young people felt more scrutinised, less in control over aspects of their life and food choices, and less able to access social support. Social media, with conflicting messages around exercise and weight loss during lockdown, has also been highlighted as influential in exacerbating symptoms.

The impact of the pandemic and restrictions on the mental health of young people is likely to last beyond the lifting of restrictions. As such, it is more important than ever that we all look for opportunities to talk openly about mental health and prioritise those activities which promote our emotional wellbeing. We hope this guide will be

helpful for young people, families and professionals affected by, or supporting someone with, eating problems.

## **WHAT TO DO IF YOU KNOW OR SUSPECT YOUR CHILD HAS AN EATING PROBLEM**

It can feel very difficult to raise the issue with your child. You might worry you will say the wrong thing, offend, upset them or make things worse. However, talking about the illness is often the first step to recovery and in the long term, your child will be grateful that you care and that you had the courage to discuss it.

There are many ways for you to support your child to help them begin to recover.

### *When and where*

- Speak to your child on your own or with one other person they trust – you want to avoid your child feeling overwhelmed.
- Find a quiet, comfortable and familiar place.
- Avoid meal times when feelings of anxiety are likely to be higher.

### *Avoid, if possible*

- Avoid focusing on food and weight – talk about feelings instead.
- Avoid statements which imply blame.
- Avoid taking on the role of a therapist - you do not need to have all the answers, rather it is most important to listen and create a space for your child to talk.

### *Stay calm*

- Your child may well deny that there is a problem, they may become angry or upset. This is perfectly normal.
- If your child becomes angry or defensive, try to avoid getting angry yourself – an angry response is most likely an indication that you are right to be worried. Stay calm and reassure your child there is no pressure but you will be there when he or she is ready.
- Approach them again another time to remind them why you are worried and that help is available.

### *Practical Strategies / Tips*

- Offer to make an appointment for your child with the GP, go along with them if this would help.
- Encourage your child to keep doing the activities they enjoy doing – it will remind them that they have a range of other coping strategies and can distract them from the thoughts and behaviours associated with the eating problems.

- Introduce your child to other coping strategies such as relaxation, mindfulness techniques, listening to music, colouring. While exercise is a helpful strategy for most people, some people with an eating disorder will exercise too much.
- If appropriate, remind your child that social media images aren't realistic and are often airbrushed.
- Discuss and look at helpful resources with your child, they may prefer to look at these on their own or with you. There are web-based resources recommended at the end of this guide.
- Contact the school to find out about support they might be able to provide such as regular check-ins or a lunchtime plan.

#### *What to say*

- Use caring "I" phrases like 'I've noticed' and talk about why you are worried
- Help them to feel it is safe to talk to you
- Ask them how they feel
- Give them time to talk about their feelings
- Listen respectfully to what they have to say
- Support them to seek help

#### *Conversation Starters*

- I've noticed that you don't want to eat with us. Is there something worrying you?
- I've noticed you're not enjoying food like you used to. Is there anything you want to talk about?
- I think that maybe I saw you hiding your food. Is something the matter?
- I wonder if something is worrying you, I noticed you don't seem to be eating in public anymore.
- It worries me that you always seem to disappear to the bathroom after you've eaten. Is there anything you'd like to tell me?
- I've noticed that you're exercising more than usual. Is something on your mind?
- I might not understand, but if you need someone to talk to, I will help as much as I can.
- I've noticed you don't seem quite yourself recently. Is there anything on your mind?
- I wonder if you would like to talk about how you are feeling?
- I'm here for you when you're ready to talk.

## **MENTAL WELLBEING**

### **The Wellbeing Continuum**

It is normal to experience challenges when growing up, particularly during adolescence. It can therefore be helpful to think of mental wellbeing as a continuum that ranges from feeling happy and content to experiencing really strong and difficult emotions that can be extremely difficult to manage. These difficulties are usually temporary and with support and coping strategies a person's mental wellbeing will improve.

## The Mental Wellbeing Continuum



How you might respond and the support that your child needs depends on where they are on this continuum.

In almost all situations, children and young people's mental wellbeing is best supported by those closest to them, particularly parents, family members, friends, and other key adults such as school staff. However, some people will require specialist help. When someone develops an eating problem or disorder it is an indication that they are struggling with their mental wellbeing and if not addressed it could have much longer term implications for the person's mental and physical health. As with most mental illnesses, early intervention is important for helping someone recover.

### What is Resilience?

Resilience is our ability to manage life's challenges, bounce back from adversity, and move forward. Children, young people and families all differ in their resilience. Resilience is something that changes depending upon our situation and while we can be resilient in some areas of our life, we might struggle in others.





How a young person manages a difficult time will depend upon the support around them, the coping strategies they have and the significance they place on each of their experiences.

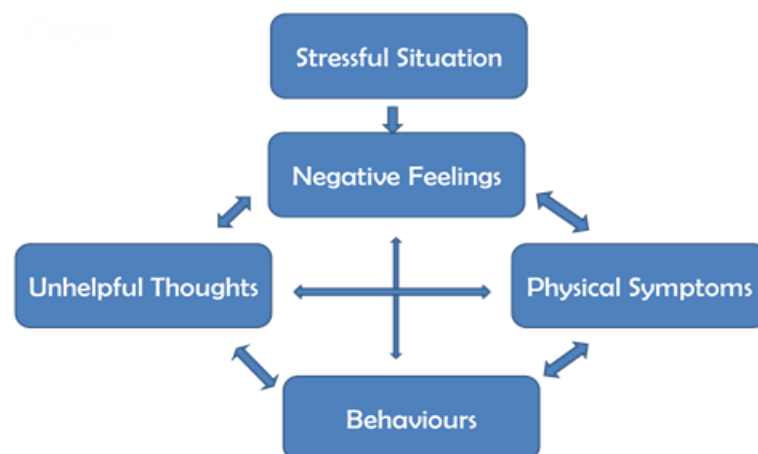
As a young person grows and develops, they learn coping strategies that help them to manage difficult times in the future. These are behaviours that they learn through their relationships, interactions with others and experiences of challenge. However, they are not always helpful or good for us. The eating behaviours associated with eating problems and eating disorders are an example of a coping strategy or attempt to feel in control during really difficult times. Unfortunately, these eating behaviours can have long lasting consequences for a young person's physical and mental health. In order to support a young person's recovery it is important to help them learn and practice more helpful coping strategies.

## **SUPPORTING YOUR CHILD'S MENTAL WELLBEING**

### **Challenging Thoughts, Feelings and Behaviours**

When we feel out of control, anxious or stressed we don't always think in a balanced way. We can focus on upsetting thoughts and feelings about ourselves, for example, *'they don't like me. I'm useless...'* These thoughts can go around and around in our head and become more extreme, impacting how we feel and how we behave.

One of the main challenges for a young person with an eating problem or eating disorder is how they think about themselves, their day to day experiences and what other people think about them. They often feel out of control of certain areas of their life and the eating behaviour can become one way of retaining a sense of control.



**One way to start to break this cycle is to pay more attention to our thoughts, feelings and behaviours and the connections between them. You can help your child to identify whether their thoughts are unhelpful or helpful.**

For young people who are good at talking about how they are feeling, it can be useful to help them to recognise and challenge their own negative thoughts and identify helpful alternatives. This can help them change unhelpful feelings and behaviours.

**A good starting point and one of the most natural ways to support your child with the development of this skill is to talk more openly about how you overcome challenges.**

Key adults who model effective coping strategies themselves are a good source of learning for young people. Talking openly about a problem, say at work, and explaining what your initial thoughts, feelings and behaviours were, can normalise things for young people. Talking about how you decided to change your approach to a problem by challenging your own thinking and how that worked can be really empowering.

### Helping Your Child to Challenge Unhelpful Thoughts

Remember, although many of our thoughts occur outside our control, they are just thoughts, sometime without any real basis, and are not necessarily facts. Even though we may believe a lot of our unhelpful thoughts when we are feeling stressed, it is good to remember that they should be questioned as they are often based on wrong assumptions. First you need to recognise an unhelpful thought, then you need to challenge it.

The following table gives some examples of types of thinking errors and unhelpful thoughts:

Thinking Error	Unhelpful Thoughts
Predicting the Future Catastrophising What if...	I know this party is going to be awful. What if I fail all my exams? My life is over. Eating that biscuit will make me fat.
Jumping to conclusions Taking things personally Mind reading	Why hasn't he text back? He must think I'm such an idiot! They're all looking and laughing at me.
Focusing on the negative Ignoring the positive Filtering	I don't care that I did ok in maths, I completely failed chemistry.... that's a disaster. Only 20 likes about my post, everyone hates me.

Black and white thinking All or nothing Perfectionism 'Should' thinking	That was a complete waste of time. They all hate me. I'm such a loser. I should always get full marks. I should only eat when I am really hungry.
Over-generalising	A fail in English..... I'm completely useless. I had no friends at primary school so why should high school be any different?
Eating that biscuit will make me fat.	Eating one biscuit won't make me fat it's just my mind trying to trick me. I don't need to stop myself eating things to feel better.

The following questions will encourage your child to challenge their negative thoughts and to try and make their thoughts more balanced:

- Is this thought helpful to me?
- What is the evidence for and against this thought?
- What kind of 'thinking error' could it be?
- What would you say to a friend in the same situation if they were thinking this?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of thinking in this way?
- Is there another way of looking at the situation?
- How important is this thought? How will you feel about this in 6 weeks?
- What thought could I replace this with that would be more helpful?

Here are some examples of how your child could change their thoughts from unhelpful to helpful during a stressful time like exams:

Unhelpful	Helpful
I've left it too late...it's useless.	I am going to make best use of the time I have left but I can still do this.
I'm never going to be able to get this done.	I'm going to do as much as I possibly can.
I can't cope with this.	I feel anxious, but that's ok I will take a deep breath and work through this.
I can't do this.	I'm going to give this a go but I might need to ask someone for help.
It's too hard.	This feels hard and scary but I can break it down and get through it.
Today was a disaster.	Some bits of today didn't go my way but I will think about the things that went well.

Everyone hates me.	I can't know what other people are thinking. I have great friends who I know like me and will support me.
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The 'helpful' thoughts are more realistic and will make challenges easier to handle. Being able to change their unhelpful thoughts can be a good coping strategy and reduce young people's feelings of anxiety and upset.

## **Be Mindful**

Encouraging your child to practice relaxing strategies or mindfulness techniques can be really helpful for reducing anxiety, they release hormones into the body which will make your child feel good better and more able to think clearly. You can join in with your child too. Here a couple of examples:

### *Mindful Breathing*

Find a comfortable sitting position, feet on the floor and spine straight. Close your eyes or focus your gaze on a spot slightly in front of you. Focus your attention on your breathing. When a thought pops into your head, notice it but allow it to pass by (you could imagine it passing by on a cloud or a floating leaf). Return your attention to your breathing, the sounds around you and the sensations in your body. Try to do this for 3-5 minutes.

### *Square Breathing*

Imagine a square. Breathe in for the count of 4 imagining one side of the square, pause at the top corner before exhaling for the count of 4 to the next corner, pause, inhale for 4 to the bottom corner, pause and exhale for 4 to return to the starting point. Repeat.

For other relaxation, breathing and mindfulness activities see our Healthier Minds resource: <https://blogs.glowscotland.org.uk/er/healthierminds/>

## **Self-care**

Self-care is an important aspect of improving emotional wellbeing and it will mean different things for different people. Here are some of the most popular self-care activities that young people told us about:

- Listening to music
- Spending time with friends
- Reading
- Colouring, drawing, being creative
- Cooking or baking
- Watching a favourite movie or TV series
- Going for a walk
- Talking to someone

Practice self-care for yourself as well as encouraging your child. This might include modelling healthy eating behaviours and routines for your child.

For other tips and information about promoting mental wellbeing and developing helpful coping strategies see our Healthier Minds resource:

<https://blogs.glowscotland.org.uk/er/healthierminds/>

## **WHO CAN HELP?**

### **G.P.**

It is important that you seek advice from a health professional as soon as possible if you suspect your child has developed problematic eating behaviours. Your GP will be able to provide advice and refer on to specialist services if required.

### **School Pastoral Team**

If eating problems have been noticed in school, someone from the pastoral team or senior management team will contact you to discuss these concerns. Similarly you should let someone at the school know if you have concerns about your child's eating. This information will help the school to put a plan in place to provide support for your child. The following supports may be considered within a Wellbeing Plan:

- Wellbeing check-ins with a member of staff
- Time out card to allow your child a break from class if necessary
- Adaptations to the timetable which take into account energy levels
- Reduced homework

### **Joint Support Team**

School staff may wish to discuss your child at a Joint Support Team (JST) Meeting. This is a meeting held in school with an Educational Psychologist. At the JST your child's needs and plan will be discussed and the psychologist can provide the school with advice and guidance on the most appropriate supports. It may also be decided at the JST that a referral will be made to the Educational Psychology Service for further support. Your consent will be sought before your child is discussed at a JST.

## **Educational Psychology Service**

If a referral to the Educational Psychology Service is accepted you, and if they would like to, your child, will be invited to attend a meeting with a member of school staff and the psychologist. Information will be gathered in order to decide the role of the psychologist. There is a range of ways that a psychologist might become involved:

- Providing support, advice and training to the school team in relation to your child's support needs
- Further assessment of your child's additional support needs
- Direct support for your child
- Liaison with health professionals to ensure joined up working between agencies
- Providing support to you as parents or carers
- Signposting to other agencies and services

## **East Renfrewshire School Nursing Team**

When a referral is received this is triaged and consent is sought from the young person for the involvement of the school nurse. A face-to-face visit is arranged to gather further information from you and your child. The school will also be contacted for further information.

A Universal Wellbeing and/or My World Triangle assessment is undertaken to gauge risk using the universal wellbeing indicators; Safe, Healthy, Achieving, Nurtured, Active, Respected, Responsible and Included (SHANARRI). Vulnerability, resilience, protective factors and environment would be measured and awarded a Health Performance Indicator (HPI). The school nurse will talk through with you and your child any questionnaires they use to make sure you understand their purpose.

If your child has a high risk HPI, the school nurse would seek further advice from either Duty CAMHS or contact Connect-ed (further information is below) if appropriate, before considering a referral to specialist services.

Should your child have a lower level risk HPI, the school nurse may offer other support and/or check in with the young person in relation to their worries. They may also consider a referral to the Community Dietetics Team if appropriate.

## **Healthier Minds Service**

This team supports the mental and emotional wellbeing of children and young people aged 10 to 18. Membership of the team includes personnel from CAMHS, Children 1st, Educational Psychology, Social Work, RAMH and School Nursing. Youth Counselling can also be accessed.

If you are concerned about your child or young person please contact your child/young person's school and discuss your concerns with their pastoral teacher and/or member of school leadership team.

### **Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and Connect-ed (Specialist Eating Disorder Service)**

Your GP or the school nurse may wish to make a referral to CAMHS to ensure your child gets the necessary support for their mental and physical health.

- Your child will be allocated an E-Choice Appointment and this will take place within five working days. These appointments are generally at 10am Monday – Friday in East Renfrewshire CAMHS. You and your child will be asked to attend in person due to the requirement of physical observations and potentially needing to draw blood for further tests. You will meet two CAMHS Clinicians from different disciplines (e.g. Nursing, Psychology, Occupational Therapy, Psychiatry, and Family Therapists).
- Following the E-Choice appointment a plan will be discussed with you and your child and a report will be sent to you, the referrer and, with your consent, to other professionals who may be involved.
- If appropriate, your child will be referred on for further, specialist support from the Connect-ed Team

### **Connect-ed Team**

The Connect-ed team supports young people, their families and professionals with issues relating to eating disorder diagnosis, across NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde. Connect-ed are a small specialist team operating within CAMHS. Staff will ensure that your child and you are involved in decisions.

The Connect-ed Team have a variety of roles including:

- assessing your child's needs
- working with a team of professionals to provide the most appropriate care and support for your child
- providing advice to you and other professionals involved in your child's care
- providing specialist pieces of work e.g. Family Based Treatment, Dietetics, cognitive behavioural therapy, and individual therapy
- Working with groups of young people and/or parents/carers

More information can be found on our website: <https://www.nhsggc.org.uk/your-health/health-services/specialist-childrens-services/our-services/eating-disorders-connect-ed/#>

## CONCLUSION

We hope that you have found this guide useful in relation to eating disorders or problems. Hopefully you now have a better understanding of the different types of eating disorders and how to spot signs that your child may have an eating problem. The guide also highlights the range of support that is available to you and your child, including many links and additional sources of information and support for you to access.

## FIND SUPPORT ONLINE

### **Beat Eating Disorders – The UK’s Eating Disorder Charity**

Visit their website, find them on social media or call their helpline for online support groups, one-to-one chat and information about eating disorders and recovery.

<https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/>

@beatED

FB beat.eating.disorders

Helpline: 0808 801 0677 [help@beateatingdisorders.org.uk](mailto:help@beateatingdisorders.org.uk)

Youthline: 0808 801 0711 [fyp@beateatingdisorders.org.uk](mailto:fyp@beateatingdisorders.org.uk)

Studentline: 0808 801 0811 [studentline@beateatingdisorders.org.uk](mailto:studentline@beateatingdisorders.org.uk)

For services in your area: [helpfinder.beateatingdisorders.org.uk](http://helpfinder.beateatingdisorders.org.uk)

### **Young Minds – Mental Health Charity for Young People**

Information, advice and support for young people who are struggling with their mental health. Includes specific guidance around eating problems.

<https://youngminds.org.uk/>

@youngmindsuk

FB YoungMinds

### **Connect-ed – NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde**

Information and advice about eating disorders and the specialist service for all young people under 18 years old with eating disorders in Glasgow and Clyde. Connect-ed provide services for under 18 year olds in Greater Glasgow and Clyde.

<https://www.nhsggc.org.uk/your-health/health-services/specialist-childrens-services/our-services/eating-disorders-connect-ed/#>



### **CARED Scotland – NHS**

Designed for parents and carers of young people (aged up to 25) in Scotland who have recently received a diagnosis of an eating disorder and are about to, or have just started, treatment.

<https://caredscotland.co.uk/>

@CaredsCotland

### **SEDIG - Scottish Eating Disorders Interest Group**

Scotland's charity for supporting, connecting and informing anyone who is affected by eating disorders.

<https://www.sedig.org/>

### **Eating Disorders Support**

English based organisation providing information, advice and direct support.

<http://www.eatingdisorderssupport.co.uk/>

Helpline: [01494 793223](tel:01494793223)

Email: [support@eatingdisorderssupport.co.uk](mailto:support@eatingdisorderssupport.co.uk)

### **Mind – Mental Health Charity**

Information, advice and support for anyone experiencing mental health difficulties. Includes specific information about eating problems.

<https://www.mind.org.uk/>

### **Anorexia and Bulimia Care**

Advice, information and support for young people, carers and professionals.

<https://www.anorexiabulimiacare.org.uk/>

### **My Body My Way**

Advice for parents and carers about promoting a positive body image

<https://irowellbeing.com/uploads/webpages/File/My-Body-My-Way-Parent-s-Info.pdf>

## **East Renfrewshire Healthier Minds – Wellbeing Resource**

Information and advice on promoting and supporting the mental wellbeing of young people.

<https://blogs.glowscotland.org.uk/er/healthierminds/>

## **Healthier Minds Service**

For more information please visit:

<https://blogs.glowscotland.org.uk/er/healthierminds/how-and-when-agencies-can-help/healthier-minds-service-2/information-for-parents-carers/>

## **Conversation Starters – further information**

Eating disorders.com: [How to talk to someone you're worried about](#)

Beat: [10 Helpful Things to Say to Someone With an Eating Disorder](#)