

Tips for Teachers

If there is a concern about an eating disorder:

- Decide which staff member will approach the student ideally one that the student particularly likes and trusts.
- Decide on how to involve the parents/guardians, and discuss your concerns with them. Encourage the student to talk to their parents, and have a separate conversation with just them as well. While some parents may recognize the fact that their child is showing signs of an eating disorder, others may be in denial, asserting that weight loss is a 'healthy' or 'natural' thing, or that their child could never have this kind of problem. Some important issues to consider are family relationships, confidentiality, boundaries, and timing.
- Decide on the best time to talk to the student, which may or may not coincide with the student's acknowledgement of the issue. You need to use your own judgment; if you feel that the student is losing his/her grip on reality, or that his/her life is in danger, it is appropriate and necessary to discuss this quickly.
- When in conversation, use a supportive, clear, non-judgmental, and assertive tone. Keep in mind that an aggressive approach will NOT be effective. Enter into the conversation slowly, first asking the student how they have been feeling lately, thus giving them a chance to disclose the problem before you start telling them what your observations are and what you are concerned about. For example, "Tim, I've noticed lately that...(e.g. you seem pretty unhappy and you're not as outgoing as you used to be, your school work is getting more difficult for you, you've lost your 'sparkle', you've drastically changed your eating habits, etc.) and I'm really concerned about you. Have you noticed these things?"
- Expect an unpredictable reaction. The student may be "relieved", welcome your care and concern, and/or confirm your suspicions. The student may deny that anything is wrong, and push away your helping hand. The student may insist that everything is "just fine", and resent the fact that you are "overreacting" or "interfering". Keep in mind that this kind of response is quite common as eating disorders are coping mechanisms.
- Educate yourself. Make sure that you do your homework before you approach the student. Read some literature, search the web, or contact a center for eating disorders. Call MEDA (617-558-1881) to consult with an eating disorder specialist. You will be better able to help the student if you are well informed.
- Consider how you will best help the student after you approach them. Be supportive and offer your assistance, but do not play therapist. Be careful when offering advice; your aim is to gather support for the student in getting the care they need.