HOW TO HELP A FRIEND with eating and body image issues

If you are reading this, chances are you are concerned about the eating habits, weight, or body image of someone you care about. Below are some ideas to help you help your friend. Supporting a friend through this time can be difficult or uncomfortable, so just seeking information is a good first step.

LEARN as much as you can about eating disorders. The National Eating Disorder Association is a good place to start online. NYU’s Student Health Center has a multidisciplinary Eating Issues Team, which can help you and your friend access the information and services you need. To learn how to effectively support your friend, or schedule an appointment, call the Wellness Exchange at 212-443-9999.

KNOW THE DIFFERENCE between facts and myths about weight, nutrition, and exercise. This will help you reason with your friend about any inaccurate ideas that may be fueling her or his disordered eating patterns.

BE HONEST AND OPEN about your concerns with the person who is struggling with eating or body image problems. Avoiding it or ignoring it won’t help.

HAVE REALISTIC, FLEXIBLE EXPECTATIONS. Avoid making rules or promises, or setting expectations that you cannot or will not uphold. For example, “I promise not to tell anyone.” Or, “If you do this one more time, I’ll never talk to you again.” Your friend is responsible for his or her own actions and the consequences of those actions. You can listen, but remember, you are not their therapist, but their friend. Be sure to encourage them to seek professional help, especially if they talk to you repeatedly about these concerns.

AVOID SKIN-DEEP COMPLIMENTS. Comment on your friend’s sparkling personality, academic successes, kindness or other accomplishments, rather than physique.

BE A ROLE MODEL. Your sensible eating, reasonable exercise regimen and self-acceptance can show your friend a healthy alternative.

TELL SOMEONE. It may seem difficult to know when, if at all, to tell someone else about your concerns, but it’s best to address body image or eating problems as early as possible. If you’re not sure where to start, call the NYU Wellness Exchange — available 24/7 at (212)443-9999.

Remember that you cannot force someone to seek help, change their habits or adjust their attitudes. You can make important progress in honestly sharing your concerns, providing support and knowing where to go for more information. People struggling with anorexia, bulimia or binge eating disorder do need professional help. There is help available and there is hope.