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Instructor concerned for student with possible eating disorder ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I am the owner of a dance studio. I also teach dance at a local school. One of my students at my studio and school confronted me last year about a problem with eating. We talked things out and she said she would be ok. She went to dance in NYC for the last year and came back a few weeks ago. She used to be so beautiful and graceful; now she looks like a living skeleton. Before she left for NYC, she was a thin, 5'11", 130 lbs. Now she is a sickly 110 lbs. She now denies her problem along with her mother. I know she desperately needs help before it's too late, but I don't know what else I can do. Please help!

Sincerely,
Kate

Answer

Dear Kate,

Although it's not clear if your student has received an actual diagnosis, it can be difficult when you're noticing a concerning situation but the person affected is in denial. While you can't demand that your student seek help, there are ways to open up the conversations so that she's aware of your support moving forward. You may also point your student in the direction of resources if she does decide to seek help.

Your concerns are certainly justified. Not only has your student come to you in the past regarding her eating patterns, but eating disorders [2] can have a number of long-term impacts, including, but not limited to: muscle loss and weakness, reduction of bone density, fainting and fatigue, and increased risk of heart failure. Having the conversation with her about your concerns can be difficult, but family and friends often play a crucial role in identifying worrying symptoms and encouraging people to get help. Many individuals who are in recovery from disordered eating behaviors report that the support of family and friends was vital to them getting well. Initiating this conversation sooner, rather than later, may help to prevent any additional impacts from potentially disordered eating.

You may consider the following information to help you structure and prepare for your conversation:

- **Learn about disordered eating and available resources.** Understanding the signs and symptoms of disordered eating, as well as the complex factors that contribute to eating disorders, can help you better articulate what you're noticing and why it's critical to seek help for the behaviors and changes you have noticed. The National Eating Disorders Association [3] can be a great resource to start.
- **Set a private time and place to talk.** This could be with the student directly, just the student's mother, or with both of them. No matter what, ensuring the conversation isn't happening in front of others can help you all feel more at ease while you engage in a difficult conversation.
- **Be honest and use "I" statements.** Share your concerns about the behaviors and changes that you have noticed honestly. Avoiding or ignoring it won't help anyone. When you're expressing your concern, focus on the behaviors or changes that you have personally noticed and why you're concerned, such as, "I notice that you have lost a considerable amount of weight, and I feel worried that it may be negatively impacting your health."
- **Be caring, but firm.** Make sure that you stick to the facts of what you have noticed, and why they're concerning to you. Expressing your care and concern doesn't mean giving into manipulation or making rules or promises you can't keep but rather expressing what you feel in a compassionate and unwavering way.
- **Share information about the resources you've researched** if they seem open to it. Increasing someone's awareness about resources, whether they choose to access them or not, can be really empowering. And, if they don't want to access resources at that time, they might be ready to access them in the future. Whenever they're ready, you might also offer to accompany them to seek out the services or resources as another way you can provide support.
- **Reiterate your continued support.** Let them know that you'll be there for them whenever they're ready to take action. Remind them that there is no shame in recognizing and admitting that they struggle with an eating disorder or other mental health issue. It may also help to remind them that you will be there to support them wherever they're at in those processes.

During your conversation, you may learn that her eating patterns are changing due to an underlying issue; complex family problems and other psychological factors often surround eating

disorders. If the student has an eating disorder, her mother may be in denial, or she may feel embarrassed, helpless, or frustrated by her daughter's behavior. The National Eating Disorders Association's [How to Help a Loved One](#) ^[4] has more information about how to help people with eating disorders. You may also want to encourage your student to speak with a health care provider who is familiar with eating disorders.

Lastly, it's also worth noting that even after these conversations with your student and her mother, she may still deny there's a problem. Sometimes, there's a limit to how much you can do to help someone who may have an eating disorder. However, you've made the most significant choice you can — to express your concern and support. People seek help for themselves when they're ready and sometimes their timetable is different than what you would expect. As a caring adult in this student's life, you can continue to be a source of support no matter how she chooses to proceed.

Alice!

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