Partner living with bulimia — What can I do to help her and myself? [1]

Dear Alice,

I just found out that my wife of five years is bulimic. I don’t know how I should feel or what I should do. I feel like it is my fault but my wife tells me that she has had this problem for over ten years. I am torn between my emotions, I love her dearly and wish to help but I feel like she has hidden this from me and I don’t know about this. How can I help and who can I talk to? My wife told me that I should be supported but not to ask her too many questions. What should I do?

Signed:
Tim

Answer

Dear Tim,

When a loved one shares such personal information, or you come to realize there is someone close to you that may need support, it’s not unusual to feel shock, confusion, hurt, grief, guilt, mistrust, or other strong emotions. There are a host of feelings you may have experienced since discovering that your partner has been living with bulimia. While it may feel like a challenge, know that her eating disorder or her not telling you about it isn’t your fault — it’s not uncommon for those living with eating disorders to try to hide them from their loved ones. It’s great that you want to help her, and there are a number of ways you can support her without violating her request to not ask her too many questions. Additionally, you may want to take some time for yourself to make sure you’re handling your own needs and emotions at this time.

It’s clear that you have a lot of questions that you want answered, but it also appears that your partner isn’t ready to answer them yet. She may need more time before sharing such personal, and possibly painful, information with you. It can be helpful for you to seek out information on your own about eating disorders so you can be more familiar with them. In this way, you can provide support, but your wife doesn’t need to educate you about eating disorders while also experiencing it. It may also lend you some insight to what her experiences may be like without her having to answer questions. For more general information about what characterizes an
eating disorder, you can start with Eating disorders vs. non-disordered eating [2] in the Disordered Eating & Eating Disorders [3] section of the Go Ask Alice! Nutrition & Physical Activity [4] archives. Another great resource is the National Eating Disorders Association [5], which provides information about eating disorders as well as resources for family and friends who are providing support. You can also continually let her know that you’re there for her, support her, and will be willing to talk more when she feels comfortable or ready.

This may also be an opportunity for you to encourage her to seek help (if she hasn’t already), even if she doesn’t want to you to ask too many questions. Seeking help can be challenging, so there may be ways that you can help if she’s interested. You could ask if she’d like you to help her with setting up appointments or finding a health care provider that is a good match for her. You could also offer to go with her to these appointments if that will make her feel more comfortable. If she’s not open to your suggestion now, then it may be best to approach her about this at another time. However, she’ll know that when she’s ready, you’ll be there to support her not only emotionally but with some of the more tangible aspects of recovery. The recovery process can take a long time (for some, years), and for each person it looks different. It may not be a straight line, with potential relapses as she learns healthy eating patterns again. However, having a support system is key for the recovery process, so continually being there for her throughout will be critical. You can also periodically check in with her to see how she’s doing — while you want to respect not asking too many questions, this also doesn’t mean ignoring it. Following up at times can be helpful to getting her on the road or to maintaining her recovery.

It’s also key that you take care of yourself during this time. Also be sure to continue scheduling time into your day for activities you enjoy and give yourself an opportunity to relax. While you may be looking for assistance for your wife, it can also be helpful to look for someone with whom you can talk as well. Checking in with a trusted family member, friend, or mental health professional can provide an opportunity to talk through your concerns about this situation. Providing support to your wife through this can also bring up a number of emotions or challenges for yourself, so it can be helpful for you to have your own outlet to handle your feelings. Additionally, it may help you be a more supportive partner to your wife.

Best wishes,

Alice!

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