Dear Alice,

I found out last week that my best friend is a bulimic-anorexic. I am now trying to find out what resources exist both at Columbia and in the greater city of New York to help me help her deal with the problem. She has told me that she wants to solve it, but needs help, both from someone (like me) who will make sure that she does not cancel her appointment with someone at the last minute (as she has already done), and from a professional who can help with the larger issue of her eating disorder. I know about three different options at Columbia — the nutritionists, the Women, Food, and Self-Esteem group, and the Eating Disorders therapy group. My question is: is this the best first step? What are the next steps? Thanks a lot...

? Tres Concerned

Answer

Dear Tres Concerned,

You are definitely on the right track. When we care about someone with an eating disorder, our natural tendency is to see the eating disorder as a problem and to try to help the person get rid of that problem. But you need to remember that an eating disorder is not only a problem in itself, but also an attempted solution to a different problem. The eating disorder is your friend’s attempt to cope and to communicate. There is no simple cause of eating disorders, and no simple solution or cure. Most people find some combination of medical care, individual therapy, and group therapy helpful in their process back to healthy eating. Change is slow and full of relapses and setbacks. This can be frustrating, and both the person with the eating disorder and her family and friends can feel impatient. It is incredibly mature and motivated of your friend to ask for your assistance in helping her keep appointments and stay on the right track.
At Columbia, there are a number of resources for people with eating disorders. Your friend probably needs to start with individual counseling at Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) [2]. An eating disorders specialist is available for appointments at x4-2878. S/he might or might not recommend the eating concerns or body image therapy group, both of which are offered each semester. S/he might also suggest seeing a nutritionist at the same time to reinforce behavioral changes with good healthy eating habits. Another resource that’s now available is the Eating Disorders Team [3] of Health Services at Columbia, you can make an appointment by calling x4-2284 or logging on to Open Communicator [4].

Off-campus, many private psychotherapists who specialize in eating disorders are available. There’s also the National Eating Disorders Association [5] eating disorders information and referrals line at 1.800.931.2237.

Good luck helping your friend, and don't forget that there are resources available for you, too. You don't have to take on your friend's burden alone? you can go for a session or two at CPS, call Nightline at x4-7777 just to talk, or get a referral from the National Eating Disorders Association. Take care of yourself; that way, you can truly be a good friend for someone else.

Alice!

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