What NOT to Say When Someone You Love is in Recovery

1. “You look healthy; you must be feeling better!” “You’re starting to gain weight again.” or “You’d look much better with some meat on your bones.”
   It’s best not to comment on weight or appearance at all, even if it is well-intentioned. People with eating disorders may equate “looking healthy” with “looking fat,” and this comment could be upsetting for them. Furthermore, weight gain doesn’t always imply that they are recovered or “better.” Full recovery takes quite some time, so even if they look recovered, they may still be struggling mentally or emotionally. They may actually need additional support during this time as they adjust to the changes in their body and behavior.

2. “But you’re so thin! Why would you need to lose weight?”
   Eating disorders are mental illnesses. Furthermore, this person may have a distorted body image and aren’t able to see what you see.

3. “If you’d just eat ______, you’d feel better!”
   Eating disorders are not just about food. They are complicated mental illnesses, and giving simplistic solutions can undermine a person’s struggle.

4. “Should you really be eating that?” or “Wow, you ate a lot today!”
   People with eating disorders are often self-conscious about their food choices. Don’t shame them for eating something you consider “unhealthy,” as they may already have reservations about eating these foods as part of their treatment plan. These comments may trigger them.

5. “I don’t know how you do it—I could never go without eating for that long.”
   Eating disorders are not about willpower, they are serious mental illnesses.

6. Comments about your own weight loss or talking about needing to lose weight yourself.
   This can be triggering or upsetting for someone with an eating disorder. They might compare their body size or eating habits to yours, and talking about how much weight you need to lose can trigger them into using eating disorder behaviors again.

7. “Just snap out of it!” or “Just eat!”
   If it were this easy, most people would have “snapped out of it” a long time ago. Be patient and try to understand the challenges your friend is facing.

8. “Wow, if you think you’re fat then you must think I’m really fat.”
   A person’s eating disorder is about him/herself, not you.
9. “You look even skinnier than before.”
   Even if you are saying this because you’re worried about your friend, they could see it as a compliment or it could hurt their feelings and make them feel even more self-conscious.

10. “But you don’t look like you have an eating disorder.”
    You can’t always tell when someone has an eating disorder; they affect people of all shapes, weights, ages, races, abilities, and genders. Telling someone they don’t look “sick enough” to have an eating disorder erases their struggle or can make them believe they don’t deserve help.

11. “Your meal plan seems like too much food/not enough food.”
    Leave those decisions to your loved one’s dietitian and treatment team—they will know what food intake is healthy and safe. If you are a parent/guardian who is concerned about your child, see if you can consult with the dietitian at the next appointment.

12. “I just want to lose a couple of pounds. What’s your secret?”
    An eating disorder is NOT a diet, it is a disease. It’s never appropriate to ask a person with an eating disorder for weight loss tips.

13. “I wish I could have an eating disorder; I need to lose weight!” or “I have an eating disorder—I love food TOO much!”
    Please don’t make jokes about eating disorders, especially in the presence of someone suffering from one. They are deadly diseases and even if you are intending to make a lighthearted comment, you could still hurt someone’s feelings.

14. “How could you have an eating disorder? You’re eating right now.”
    Just because someone seems to be eating “normally” in front of you doesn’t mean they aren’t struggling with disordered thoughts, feelings, and behaviors about food and body image.

15. Negative comments about others’ bodies.
    Even if you’re not talking about your recovering friend’s appearance, they might be comparing their body to others’. It’s best to never shame or make fun of anyone’s body or appearance!