

- It is essential for thinking to change in order for recovery to be both possible and sustainable. The sufferer's negative thought patterns need to be challenged and changed, as they affect feelings and choices. The Bible says: 'Be careful how you think; your life is shaped by your thoughts' (Prov. 4:23, GNB).
- A healthy relationship with food will need to be developed: letting go of the dieting mentality and the fear of hunger, establishing boundaries around eating and maintaining a normal body weight.
- Ultimately the sufferer will have to let go of the *control* that the eating disorder has had and the *identity* that it has shaped. Honesty, repentance and love are a part of letting go and choosing a new identity - firstly as a child of God, and secondly as a unique, maturing individual.

Full recovery

- Many believe that a person has to learn to live with an eating disorder, but full recovery *is* possible.
- Eating disorders are a form of addiction, and in most cases there are strongholds from which only God can bring full release.

Further help

- To attend courses which assist recovery, visit Helena Wilkinson's website: www.helenawilkinson.co.uk
- Books on eating disorders by Helena: *Insight into Eating Disorders* (CWR); *Beyond Chaotic Eating* (RoperPenberthy Publishing Ltd, 2001), *Puppet on a String* (RoperPenberthy Publishing Ltd, 2004).

Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.
(Luke 12:6-7)

A BRIEF INSIGHT INTO EATING DISORDERS

CWR Applying God's Word
to everyday life and relationships

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Understanding Eating Disorders

Although people tend to consider eating disorders more of a young woman's issue, in fact they affect children and adults of all ages – male and female.

An eating disorder is like an iceberg. With icebergs, the part that is above the water surface is small in comparison to that which lies, ominously, *below*. Similarly, with eating disorders, what is below the surface controls what is observable. The eating disorder is a symptom of deeper problems. Despite their knowledge of the physical damage these disorders cause, sufferers persist with their anorexia, bulimia or compulsive eating because of the powerful underlying factors involved.

Significant factors may include:

- Attachment issues (separation, lack of bonding, and disruptions to attachment);
- Emotional hunger (unmet emotional needs resulting in inner emptiness);
- Negative attitude towards self (low self-worth, loss of sense of value and identity);
- Sexuality issues (fear of the adult world and need for sexual protection);
- Past or current trauma (physical, emotional and sexual abuse, bullying and loss);
- Family issues (unhelpful communication, boundaries and handling of painful feelings);
- Personal factors (personality and genetics).

Eating disorders serve a function. Whilst the underlying issues may be similar, there are clear distinctions between the different eating disorders in terms of how they manifest.

Anorexia nervosa

With anorexia, a person severely limits their food intake, has a distorted body image, refuses to maintain a normal body weight, and is intensely afraid of gaining weight, despite being below what is considered healthy.

Considerations

There is a distinct difference between the person who is on a diet and the person who has anorexia. For the anorexic, dieting becomes their *whole* way of life, and the diet serves to achieve mastery over self. Not eating may become a substitute for expressing anger. This anger may be denied or suppressed because it causes shame, but inner conflicts remain. All the feelings, needs and drives become bound up in shame. When the anorexic looks in the mirror, a distortedly large figure stares back, and fills the individual with horror and disgust.

The anorexic may try to establish a sense of individual identity and independence, and yet fears that without anorexia they are a 'nobody'. Anorexia provides a sense of achievement over one area of life when other areas are considered out of control. There is a strong pull towards perfectionism in this – to attain a life that is 'nice' and pure.

Bulimia nervosa

The main feature of bulimia is binge-eating followed by unhealthy behaviours to compensate for eating and to prevent weight gain, such as self-induced vomiting.

Considerations

There is a split between the part of the bulimic which is very much in control and copes, and the part which is dependent and does not cope well.

The nature of the illness is about hiding: the truth; feelings; food. Everything is done in secret: eating, vomiting, tears. The sufferer is trying hard to take control of their life, but they are also in a great deal of conflict. They want to present themselves as strong, and yet inside they feel needy and emotionally hungry. Life for the bulimic feels like a vicious cycle. They want to achieve high standards, and perfection in relationships, but feel it is impossible to maintain these standards. The substitute is binge-eating.

The bulimic often feels so desperate and in need, yet they fear that these desires, if exposed, will consume everything and everyone in sight. This hunger drives them to continue looking for love, but nothing ever seems to satisfy.

The end result of the bulimia, the eating and vomiting, is that the person feels empty and entirely without needs. This is precisely the feeling being sought ... In a limited way, bulimia achieves what the person wants.¹

Compulsive eating

Compulsive eating is characterised by uncontrollable eating, 'grazing' on food, and consequent weight gain.

Considerations

Food is used to block out feelings and provides a means to cope with stress, emotional conflicts and daily problems. To the compulsive eater, food means either overeating or dieting. It is also something about which they fantasise a great deal, and which offers comfort.

1. M. Dana and M. Lawrence, *Women's Secret Disorder* (London: Grafton Books, 1988), pp.59-60.

When the compulsive eater gives an account of what they have eaten during the day, they frequently fail to include certain foods. Some sufferers subconsciously believe that if they eat whilst standing up, driving or walking, it 'doesn't count'.

The compulsive eater may set out on a diet because of the pressure to be slim, but dieting feels like imprisonment and so they often find themselves making up for those things of which they have been deprived.

The person often eats guiltily and with speed, not really enjoying what they are eating, afraid that others might 'catch them'.

Turning around

Before sufferers can change, they need to look at the advantages and the disadvantages of having an eating disorder. In the early stage, they may want and yet fear recovery, but this is a normal part of the healing process.

The fact is that 'Fears about food and eating can only be overcome when the sufferer changes the way she sees herself and develops an optimistic view of her prospects ... She cannot enjoy food until she can enjoy life'.²

The process of recovery

We are physical, emotional and spiritual beings, and with eating disorders there is brokenness in all three areas. For recovery to happen there needs to be restoration in these areas:

2. J. Welbourne and J. Purgold, *The Eating Sickness, Anorexia, Bulimia and the Myth of Suicide by Slimming* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1984) p.55.

- **Physical:** eating patterns, weight and body image
- **Emotional:** feelings, thoughts, reactions, behaviours and choices
- **Spiritual:** identity, worth, value and maturity

Support framework

It is important that throughout recovery sufferers have a support network around them, including medical supervision, nutritional advice, therapeutic input, spiritual counsel and friendship.

One of the most beneficial things family and friends can do is to understand what is being communicated through the eating disorder. It is also important not to give up hope, to encourage ongoing help, and to know when to stand back.

Positive steps to change

Some steps on the road to recovery include:

- Making the decision to get better;
- Working out a viable strategy;
- Reaching out for help;
- Modifying one's life circumstances;
- Building in emotional and spiritual support;
- Facing the pain;
- Developing trust;
- Allowing time to process the changes.

Breaking free

- Eating disorders are unhealthy and self-destructive ways of dealing with painful emotions such as guilt, anxiety and anger. With expert help the sufferer can learn more positive ways of dealing with the pain of these emotions, and addressing the deeper roots underlying their feelings.