



Close to Home Study Guide

Dealing with Eating Disorders

1. Opening (1 minute)*

Dear God, we know you created us with wonderful, amazing bodies. As the Psalmist says, you “. . . formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. . . . I am fearfully and wonderfully made.” (Psalm 139:13-14) Yet, dear God, many of us are troubled and broken. We experience pain and anguish in our bodies. Help us to believe that you are always with us, yearning for us to be whole in every way: spirit, mind and body. Amen.

2. Story-telling (8 minutes)

Summarize Gina’s story. Note how the disorder began, what led her to seek help, and how God answered her prayers. Also point out that these disorders are quite common: about 1 in 12 women in Canada and the U.S. are affected (Fact 2 on page 8). If appropriate, ask how many in the group know someone who has an eating disorder. How is their experience similar to or different from Gina’s?

3. Review of pamphlet (10 minutes)

- Review the types of eating disorders described on pages 4-5, the *Facts* on page 8 and the *Lies* listed on page 11. Underscore why these disorders are so physically dangerous.
- Discuss some of the underlying reasons why people become trapped in these disorders. Note especially media messages which give unrealistic and unhealthy images of women and men. The website *About-Face* (<http://www.about-face.org/>) has much good information on this topic, as well as the video *Strength to Resist* (which can be borrowed from Mennonite Central Committee). Also, recent studies show that abuse during childhood can lead to eating disorders. See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/4417938.stm> and <http://www.something-fishy.org/prevention/abuse.php>.

4. Reading of Scripture text (15 minutes)

Before reading the story from Mark 5:24-34, point out that according to purity laws in the Scripture, discharges of blood were considered unclean. (Leviticus 15:19-30) Consequently, women had to separate themselves from others during their menstrual periods or any time they experienced such a discharge. Also, people then (and today) often believed that sickness and disability were caused by sin. One can see this throughout the Gospels in the way healing and forgiveness of sins are so often linked.

The woman in this story therefore likely lived a very difficult, lonely existence. She likely also internalized much shame and self-hatred, believing that some terrible sin kept her ill and untouchable. When Jesus healed her, he not only addressed her physical condition but also restored her spiritually and socially. After all those long years, she could participate once again in the life of her family and community. Perhaps this is why Jesus insisted that she come forward, in order to affirm her and let everyone else know too that she was healed.

- How does your congregation invite people to seek healing? How do you encourage one another to reach out for help? Are there some additional things you could do?

*The suggested time frames are for a 45-minute session. With more discussion and storytelling, you will need to adjust upward, and possibly extend to a second session.

- Highlight the way Jesus addressed this woman as daughter, one of God’s beloved children. How does your congregation communicate God’s love? How do your daughters and sons know God loves and values them?

It may also be helpful to discuss your understanding of holiness. For example, many Christians believe God calls us to be perfect, as stated in Matthew 5:48. However, the Greek word *teleios* used in that verse means being whole and complete, more than sinless or without fault. Holiness is not gained through fasting or purity but in right relationships with others and with God. See especially Micah 6:6-8 and Isaiah 58:5-7.

- What does your congregation teach about sin and holiness? About perfection and wholeness? How might these teachings affect those struggling with eating disorders?

5. Steps toward healing (10 minutes)

- Provide information about local programs or therapists who work with eating disorders.
- In looking over the suggestions for recovery on pages 8-9, which ones might people have questions about? What steps would they add? For those who know someone with an eating disorder, what has been helpful to them?
- What are some ways the church can encourage—and model—healthful living and contentment with our bodies? What are some ways the church can challenge harmful media images and messages?
- Pray together for all those touched by eating disorders, that all would find release, healing and wholeness.

6. Closing (1 minute)

Tender and compassionate God,
 you long to gather us in your arms
 as a hen gathers her chicks.
 Draw us to yourself in love,
 surround us with your grace,
 and keep us in the shelter of your wings
 so that in our time of testing
 we may not fall away. AMEN

—*Hymnal: A Worship Book* (Faith & Life Resources) #746

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This study guide is written by Linda Gehman Peachey, Director for Women's Advocacy in the Peace and Justice Ministries section of Mennonite Central Committee US. It is one of a series of free downloadable study guides for the Close to Home pamphlets, which can be ordered from the Mennonite Publishing Network of the Mennonite Church (see www.mpn.net/closetohome) or the Mennonite Brethren Kindred Productions (www.kindredproductions.com/closetohome).