

CLOSE TO HOME



DEALING WITH
eating
disorders



Step by step toward a healthy outlook

Gina grew up in a loving Christian home. She had good friends, excelled academically, and was active in sports and music in high school. She didn't think much about her weight or appearance, and was always eager to try new adventures.

Gina's eating disorder began at the end of her first year of Bible college. The transition to campus life was harder than she expected. Her studies were challenging, but she was determined to make the grades she had in high school. While she had once looked forward to being away from home, now she didn't quite know how she fit into the college environment. At times she wondered how she would make it through the year.

The disorder started gradually. The disorder started gradually. Gina gave up one food and then slowly gave up other foods. She began exercising more and taking long walks after her exercises.

Initially, controlling how much she ate and exercised felt good. But more and more, she felt miserable and isolated from others. Her weight dropped dramatically. On her walks, she had long conversations with God, praying for release from her obsessive thoughts of food and exercise.

That summer, while living at home, Gina's mother handed her a medical book opened to a page on anorexia. "I think you should read this," she said, and left the room. As Gina read, she recognized herself in the description. She decided to see her family physician.

Her doctor referred her to a therapist specializing in eating disorders. At first Gina was annoyed by the therapist. She found it even harder to eat, and she wasn't making progress. But she was determined to see what help the counseling would be.

Although most who suffer from eating disorders do not need residential treatment, Gina finally decided to enter such a specialized program. This meant that she had to share with her college friends what was happening. Thankfully, they supported her. They, along with church friends and her pastor, visited her during those two months.

Therapy helped Gina understand why she acted as she did. Unlike many anorexics, she wasn't particularly concerned by body image and weight. But like most anorexics, her exercise and eating patterns spiraled out of control because she was deeply unhappy and uncertain about her life.

"I often prayed for help—and the help came. God helped move me toward therapy. God worked through my family's concern and through the doctors and programs that helped me."

Today Gina doesn't hide her disorder from her friends. "I still have to fight with the issues," she admits. Even so, she presents

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workshops to young people, helping them to recognize the warning signs of eating disorders and to get help when they need it.

In the last ten years, Gina has had two relapses, one of them involving three months in residential treatment. Each time, her friends and family helpfully pointed out how she seemed to be acting obsessively and losing weight again.

"Food and exercise are a part of everyday normal life," she says. "You can't avoid them. I always have to be careful about how I relate to them."

What are eating disorders?

Eating disorders are serious health problems that must be treated with professional help. The primary signs of an eating disorder are unhealthy attitudes and behaviors toward food. However, the root is much deeper. Eating disorders are unhealthy ways of coping with such pressures as low self-esteem, feelings of overwhelming anxiety, a need to be perfect, a struggle with difficult or abusive relationships—or a combination of these. They are often accompanied or fed by depression, sleep disturbances, or substance abuse.

It may be very difficult for you to admit that you have an eating disorder, particularly if you have been hiding your feelings and behaviors from those around you. You may be convinced that what you are doing is perfectly normal. In the early stages, you may even feel empowered by the sense of control you have.

But now, instead of you controlling your behaviors, they are controlling you. With professional help you can focus your attention on the deeper issues, as well as on the behaviors you've developed to cope with them.

Primary forms of eating disorders

1. Anorexia nervosa involves severe weight loss from excessive dieting or exercise. The signs of this disorder include:

- restriction of food to the point that the body is dangerously thin
- obsessive calorie and gram counting
- obsessive exercise
- preoccupation with body image, and a constant fear of being fat
- wearing baggy clothing to disguise the body
- hiding food or lying about food.

The physical symptoms usually begin with unnaturally pale skin, then progress to a constant feeling of being cold and tired, hair loss, loss of menstruation in women, fatigue, and eventually the severe effects of malnutrition, including possible heart failure or starvation.

2. Bulimia nervosa involves fluctuations in weight because of binge eating followed by purging. The signs include:

- eating binges involving large quantities of food
- a disregard for hunger; overeating to the point of severe discomfort
- self-induced vomiting
- the use of diet pills, laxatives, or diuretics to control weight
- preoccupation with body image—always “feeling fat”
- hiding food or lying about food

Physical symptoms include tooth decay from stomach acid, loss of menstruation in women, damage to stomach and kidneys because of vomiting, damage to the intestinal tract through use of laxatives, lesions in the esophagus, and electrolyte imbalances.

3. Binge eating disorder is similar to bulimia, but without the purging.

4. Eating disorder not otherwise specified, or EDNOS, includes compulsive overeating or other disorders where unhealthy approaches to food intertwine with deep emotional pain.

If you are struggling with some of the signs and symptoms described above you should see a professional counselor or physician.

Eating disorders, the Bible, and the Christian story

We read a story in Mark 5:24-34 about a woman whose life is ebbing away. A flow of blood has depleted her body's resources for 12 long years. Doctors have taken her money but have not helped her, and her condition is worse than ever.

When she hears of Jesus, she experiences a spark of hope. She goes to see him, but immediately confronts barriers. In her culture, women like her were unjustly looked down upon and misunderstood. For years, she has internalized the message that she is not worthy. This alone, along with her weakened physical condition, have made it difficult to reach out.

But the woman does not give up her hope of healing. She reaches out and touches the hem of Jesus' garment, and immediately knows in her body that she is healed. Jesus knows that power has gone out of him. With compassion he tells the woman, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease" (v. 34).

If you have an eating disorder, you probably have some things in common with this woman. Energy that should be for your body's benefit is depleted or denied, and your body suffers along with your mind.

Because the woman has absorbed negative ideas about herself, we can imagine her standing at the edge of the crowd thinking, "This is my fault. I can't bear the thought of anyone knowing my problem." That is often how people with eating disorders think.

Over 12 years, there have been times when the woman has shut herself in her home, waiting to die, wanting to die. She may have used the Psalms in expressing her laments to God: "My tears have been my food day and night" (Psalm 42:3); or "My

hand and feet have shriveled; I can count all my bones" (Psalm 22:16-17).

Yet there is something in the woman that is stronger than her despair: a desire to be whole. She goes out and seeks Jesus, the great Healer. She reaches out and touches him. Like many who reach out to get help for their eating disorders, she shows faith through her courageous act of touching Jesus. If you have an eating disorder, reaching out is a great act of faith.

While you have some things in common with the woman, there are also some differences. Once you find the help you need, your

In the face of her fears, the woman reaches out and touches Jesus. . . . If you have an eating disorder, reaching out for help is a great act of faith.

recovery is likely to be a very long process, and certainly not instantaneous. It involves forward steps and backward steps on the way to freedom from the iron grip of your mind's warped messages—that you are fat or worthless, or that you do not deserve to eat. Gradual as it is, however, you will find that your recovery is a gift of God's love.

When Jesus addresses the woman, he calls her "daughter." This tender term of relationship recalls another story: the healing of a bent-over woman (Luke 13) whom Jesus calls a "daughter of Abraham." The woman who touches Jesus' garment is worthy of a birthright. This is opposite to the picture that the woman used to have of herself.

God does respond to those who seek God's healing touch upon their eating disorders. All are worthy, all are loved, and all belong in God's family.

Steps toward freedom and recovery

- 1. Reach out.** If you suspect or know that you have an eating disorder, reaching out is the first step toward recovery. Ask a family member, your pastor, your physician, or someone you trust to help you find the professional help you need. A psychiatrist, psychologist, dietitian, or physician who deals with eating disorders can outline a plan of treatment that may involve a team approach. You may need to try a number of therapists until you find the ones with whom you can work best.
- 2. Stop blaming yourself or others.** Remember that your disorder is a complex mix of medical, chemical, and psychological factors that may have very little to do with any wrong actions or words of you, your parents, or anyone else.
- 3. Consider your treatment possibilities:**
 - Your psychiatrist may prescribe medication for anxiety, depression, or obsessive behaviors.
 - Your recovery team may recommend family therapy for you and your loved ones as you explore the roots of the disorder.
 - Nutrition counselors will be helpful in dealing with attitudes and beliefs about food and body image, even though the root issues are deeper.
 - If your disorder is especially advanced, you may need an intensive outpatient or residential treatment program.
- 4. Get to the root.** Your therapist will address issues of self-esteem, painful events in your life, and the ways you deal with stress and unhealthy relationships. This work may be difficult at first, but it is an essential part of recovery.
- 5. Don't expect a quick fix.** It takes time to deal with the deep-rooted causes of your behavior.
- 6. Walk with others.** Knowing that God loves you will give you strength on the road to health. Belonging to a supportive faith community can help. You may eventually be able to help educate others about eating disorders.
- 7. Take responsibility.** While God is the ultimate Healer and caring people are there to support you, remember that *you* are the one who needs treatment. Your ownership of the recovery process is essential.



For further awareness

Books

- Fairburn, Christopher G. *Overcoming Binge Eating*. New York: Guilford Press, 2013.
- Sacker, Ira M. *Regaining Your Self*. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, 2010.
- Schaefer, Jenni. *Life without Ed*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2014.
- Sherman, Roberta Trattner and Ron A. Thompson. *Bulimia: A Guide for Family and Friends*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997.
- Vath, Raymond E. *Counseling Those with Eating Disorders*. Bibra Lake: W Publishing Group, 1994.

For parents

- Lock, James and Daniel Le Grange. *Help Your Teenager Beat an Eating Disorder*. New York: Guilford Press, 2015.
- Natashon, Abigail. *When Your Child Has an Eating Disorder*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999.
- Siegel, Michelle, Judith Brisman, and Margot Weinshel. *Surviving an Eating Disorder: Strategies for Family and Friends*, revised and updated. New York: HarperCollins, 1997.

Websites

- www.nedic.ca
- www.nationaleatingdisorders.org
- www.mirror-mirror.org
- www.something-fishy.org

Lies about eating disorders

1. Anorexia only happens to teenage girls.
Fact: Men and women, young and old can suffer from anorexia.
2. Eating disorders are about food and vanity.
Fact: They are really about deep emotional pain.
3. Bulimia and anorexia are not life threatening.
Fact: People with bulimia have died from cardiac arrest because of electrolyte imbalances or from a ruptured esophagus. People with anorexia have died of starvation.
4. You either have bulimia or anorexia.
Fact: People can experience them both simultaneously or alternately.

A word to parents or loved ones

An eating disorder is a complex condition that has much deeper roots than your words or actions. Do not blame yourself. Your first responsibility is to help your child or loved one get the help she or he needs. Consider talking with a counselor about how you can help support the recovery and deal with your own emotional journey in the process.

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**Local resources for help with
eating disorders:**

**For more information on other Close to Home
titles, go to:**

www.mennomedia.org/closetohome



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