

EATING OURSELVES TO DEATH

Hundreds of thousands of Americans today--including many Christians--struggle with eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia. Freedom lies in finding a safe place to share their struggle.

By Linda S. Mintle, Ph.D.

SALLY WAS DYING, AND WE BOTH KNEW IT. The anorexia had ravaged her 5-foot-2-inch frame. She sat quietly in my office looking more like a 10-year-old little girl than a 21-year-old woman. At 72 pounds, she was facing her fifth hospitalization this year.

Sally felt hopeless and abandoned by God. Her sunken eyes stared desperately at me: "I can't make myself eat, and I don't want to gain weight because I'm fat. I wish I could just disappear. Then I wouldn't upset anyone."

Julie was mad at God. Her life was in chaos. The man she was dating was verbally abusive, and her father had been drunk again last night. She felt out of control and rejected.

"All I can think about is my next binge," she told me. "Last night I ate an entire pizza, a pint of ice cream, and a bag of chips, and I downed a two-liter bottle of Diet Coke. Of course I felt sick and threw

it all up. I feel so ashamed."

Bob was facing serious health problems. His joints ached, his blood pressure was too high, and he had diabetes. I led him to the scale where he weighed in at 305 pounds.

"I keep gaining weight," he said. "My latest diet, like all the others, isn't working. I don't know what else to do. I know I'm hurting my body, but something overtakes me, and I still eat.

"I think my boss is embarrassed about my size. Recently he asked someone else to take new clients out to lunch."

Sally, Julie and Bob are like thousands of people who battle daily with one of life's necessities: food. I see many of them in my practice as a clinical social worker.

Sally is anorexic, and like others who share her struggle, she has an intense fear of gaining weight. She starves herself to the point of threatening her life.

Julie is bulimic and engages in regular cycles of "binging" and "purging." In her case, she purges by vomiting after eating; other bulimics may abuse laxatives or diet pills.

Binge-eaters like Bob have little to no control over food and engage in regular periods of overeating. They eat until they are uncomfortable. Afterward, they feel guilty and disgusted with themselves.

Obsessed With Thinness

Eating disorders affect a growing number of Americans. Our culture is obsessed with food and thinness--and yet we grow fatter and more sedentary every year. While approximately 50 percent of us diet, 30 percent of the population is obese.

Bombarded by images of anorexic "glamour," the average American woman at 5 feet 4 inches, 144 pounds and a size 12 hardly approximates the 5-foot-8-inch, 110-pound, size-2 model. But open any magazine, watch a movie, or turn on the television, and the perfect body is there to smile at us, setting the standard for beauty and fitness in the '90s. Thin is good. Fat is bad.

Children and teen-agers are not immune. According to a recent survey, 30 percent to 46 percent of 9-year-old girls have dieted and show eating disorder patterns.

Other studies show that most Caucasian junior high girls believe their bodies don't measure up. Teen and adult plastic surgery is at an all-time high.

Meanwhile, weight loss has become big business. Revenues in the 1980s for Diet Center, Jenny Craig, Nutri-System and Optifast alone totaled \$3 billion per year. Weight Watchers enrolled 1 million people each week in 16,000 separate meetings.

As Christians, many of us participate in these secular weight-loss programs--or ones that were developed with a Bible twist such as Weigh Down, Love Hunger, Overeaters Victorious and others. We have Christian low-fat cooking specialists, self-help books, tapes, personal testimonies, workbooks. Christian experts lecture us about healthy living, vitamins, supplements, the dietary rules of the Old Testament. You name it, we have it.

Add to these a smorgasbord of additional weight-loss options such as medication, counseling, surgery, liposuction, herbal remedies. It seems obvious: The choices for losing weight are as overwhelming as the food!

But despite all these helpful aids, there is still no magic pill for weight loss. And for many people, food and weight are more than a small problem, with roots that have little to do with the food itself.

Why is eating even an issue for Christians? As a rule we don't equate eating problems with the likes of alcohol and drug abuse. Food is not "bad"--it is meant to nourish and sustain.

But psychologically and physically, food can be abused, and abuse can form a stronghold in a person's spirit. Like other addictions, eating problems can be denied; unlike other addictions, abstinence is not the treatment.

Disturbed eating patterns are usually symbolic of emotional and spiritual distress, but getting control of the food is a necessary step in healing. A person has to stop the destructive behavior--stop the binge, the restrictive act, the compulsive overeating. A change has to occur because the behavior injures the body.

Many people with eating disorders--believers and unbelievers alike--suffer from depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and perfectionism. Emotional injury and feelings of rejection and abandonment are often present, as well as a general feeling of powerlessness in relationships. Typically, anger and hurt are buried.

Sometimes the church doesn't help. We tell each other we shouldn't be angry. Yet the Bible gives us the guide: Be slow to anger (see James 1:19-20); seek out the source of your anger (see Ps. 139:23-24); don't give full vent to your anger (see Prov. 29:11). Anger is a God-given emotion; it's not helpful to deny it exists!

Filling a Vacuum

There are many references to eating in the Bible. We are not to worry about what we will eat or drink, not to worry about our bodies (see Matt. 6:25). God wants to feed us both physically and spiritually (see Matt. 25:35). Jesus is described as the "bread of life." If we come to Him we will never thirst or hunger (see John 4:14; 6:35).

However, in Leviticus 26:26, Moses noticed that some people eat and aren't satisfied. Their dissatisfaction is usually emotional and can manifest in eating disorders. We don't want to allow food to have such power, but as the apostle Paul reminds us, we often do what we hate (see Rom. 7:15-25).

Proverbs 23 has much to say about excessive eating. Gluttony is to food what greed is to material wealth. Interestingly, it is linked to poverty (see v. 21).

Today, many diseases and even death are related to obesity. Yet overindulgence is sanctioned in our society. We have a strange paradox of allowing, even encouraging, self-gratification while desiring self-control.

Gluttony attempts to meet the needs of the soul and fill an emotional vacuum by overfeeding the body. Rather than overeat, however, we need to get to the root of the problem.

What hurt still lingers? What anxiety needs calming? What is blocking the manifestation of that particular fruit of the Spirit called self-control?

Have you noticed how few sermons we hear on the topic of gluttony and food? I've heard two in the last 30 years.

The response to both was interesting. A handful of overweight people went forward for prayer. The rest of the congregation stared at their feet and quietly shuffled out of the sanctuary. No one talked about the sermon afterward.

Why, I wondered, since most of us could relate to the topic? Here are a few thoughts:

***Eating problems are either visible or secretive.* The struggle with overeating or undereating is obvious because it manifests outwardly. The fact that people look too fat or too skinny is something we don't feel comfortable discussing. We don't confront because we feel it's not our business, yet we secretly judge others based on their weight.

In the case of bulimia, we can't see the problem as easily. Bulimics are usually normal weight because of the purging behavior. Secrecy cloaks bulimia because of the disgust and shame most bulimics feel. And shame often prevents people from asking for help.

***Food indulgence is somewhat sanctioned in the church.* Eating is deeply embedded in church culture. We organize, meet, greet, celebrate, study, live and die around food. When we gather to socialize, food is always present. Sure, we overeat at the church picnic; but overindulgence with food is not as stigmatized as, say, drunkenness.

***Many of our Christian leaders struggle with food.* For many pastors, to preach a sermon on eating or gluttony hits close to home. The tendency to overeat, skip meals and eat from emotional stress is something we all struggle with from time to time.

***We often lack empathy and understanding about the complexity of eating problems.* How often do we hear other Christians vocalize their disgust over a "fat" person? How often do we say, "It's just a lack of willpower"? Think about it--if people could easily get control, they would!

Caring for Our Temples

Gluttony, anorexia and bulimia defile the body, which the Bible tells us is the temple of the Holy Spirit (see 1 Cor. 6:19). Clearly, we need to take care of our bodies, to discipline them and bring them into subjection (see 1 Cor. 9:27). The constant preoccupation with food--like anything that monopolizes our time and emotional energy--does not just hurt us physically and emotionally; it leads us to be less sensitive to God.

What then do we do to develop self-control and still understand and empathize with the complexities of these disorders? Here are some suggestions:

1. Recognize the problem. If you are obsessed by food or weight, don't allow the condition to worsen. Listen to your friends and family who want to help and have your best interests at heart. Don't deny the problem because you are embarrassed or ashamed.

2. Want to be made well. Find the desire to be made whole and free from the struggle. Our God is faithful and helps us battle our problems. With God, we are overcomers.

You find the will; let others encourage; and the Holy Spirit will empower. But you must want to give up the obsession. Many of my patients fight the ultimate surrender of their will to God's.

Until you make the decision to "let go and let God," you won't get better.

3. Be persistent in your fight. It's easy to get discouraged and give up, especially when the battle is faced daily. Most victories come with peaks and valleys. Some days will be easier than others; refuse to be brought under the power of anything other than God (see 1 Cor. 10:23).

4. Seek moderation in eating. We need to eat. Desire healthy patterns, and learn to see food as a source of nutrition and sustenance. Not eating or overeating are the extremes and need to be replaced with balance.

5. Accept the fact that you have limitations. God designed you with certain physical characteristics. Very few of us will ever look like supermodel Cindy Crawford no matter what we do! We are uniquely formed by God and don't have to be perfect for God to love us. Physical appearance is not the most important part of who you are.

6. Focus on becoming like Christ. While we should take care of the body God has given us, we need to work on conforming our *character* to Christ. That includes not judging others by outward appearances; after all, God looks at the heart (see 1 Sam. 16:7). Don't believe or promote the idea that people should look a certain way to be accepted.

7. Confront unkind remarks. When you hear a fellow Christian make an unkind remark about weight, tell him how it affects you. This will increase your assertiveness and, possibly, the sensitivity of others. Those who do not struggle with food are often unaware how hurtful their remarks can be.

8. Ask others for help and accountability. We need to encourage each other and pray. Intercession is often behind a spiritual breakthrough. Programs and interventions can be helpful because they do require accountability to others.

Sally, who was anorexic, didn't give up the fight. She agreed to go to an in-patient program, gained the necessary weight and is practicing healthy eating today. Each day she has to surrender her need for control and trust God. Sally has learned to see God as an unconditional, loving Father who won't leave her no matter what she does.

Julie worked hard to break the binge-purge cycle. She learned that she could control only her responses to people, not their responses to her. Julie became more assertive and ended an unhealthy relationship with her boyfriend. Five years later, she can hardly remember being so obsessed with food.

Bob continues to lose one to two pounds a week and has lost 70 pounds so far. He has given up dieting and is committed to eating properly and exercising for the rest of his life. Instead of reaching for food when he is upset, he prays, takes a walk and uses relaxation to calm himself. As you can see, these are battles that can be won. Each of these people has fought the good fight and will finish the race. You can do the same. *

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