

PART A—RECOGNIZING*How to know when your loved one has an eating disorder***Chapter 1: Child's Perspective****MY STORY**

The nurses murmured to each other under fluorescent lighting as I lay shivering on the metal hospital bed, cold. Later, I would learn that they had marveled at my hypothermic, sixty-pound sack of bones, reasoning, “She should be dead.” I was a breach of science; a modern-day miracle. Yet in that profound moment, all I could think was: “Why can’t I lose any more weight?”

After four years of slow and steady starvation, I had finally quit eating altogether.

It started when I began to squint my eyes for the camera. I wanted to create laughter lines in a laughter-less face. Then, I began sucking in my cheeks. I liked how it made me look thinner. Model-like. I was nine years old.

The next four years were a blur. Anorexia starved my mind, but I’ll always remember the darkness. Days smudged with counting calories and streaming tears. Days filled with frowns, fierce yells and fists pounding against my father’s chest.

The anorexia resulted from a number of factors. I was rootless, having moved ten times before the age of seven. We lived everywhere, from Ontario, to Quebec, to England, to Congo and Nigeria where my parents served as a missionary, and then back to Ontario again.

This state of constant transition left me unstable; I would begin to get attached, only to be torn up and away. I had no control over where we lived. My feelings didn’t seem to matter. And because my father was following ‘the call’ of God, I began to resent the faith that forced us to be homeless.

Being the eldest of four children, my parents, who homeschooled us, were strictest with me. Nothing was debatable; everything, from going to bed on time to completing chores to not being allowed to watch TV was a hard, fast rule. No discussion. If an order was broken, Mum would hand me over to Dad to be punished by a spank from his hand or a wooden spoon. No follow-up; merely pain which, over time, turned into bitterness.

Church was another regulation. I was never allowed to miss a service. Faith was a task. I didn’t understand this far-away God, but wanted to please my father who was never home—who was always visiting this church person or that. I became jealous of the people he visited. And I thought by getting baptized, perhaps I’d be ‘in’ with my Dad’s crowd and he’d call on me too.

Dad loved us by doing his job so well he put ministry before family. He’d kiss us on the cheeks early in the morning and lead Bible devotions and sigh when we asked him questions on Sermon-Writing day. I hated Sermon-Writing day.

I got baptized at age eight because Dad said I should and I wanted to please him the same way I wanted to please God. I associated God with my father—a distant, unemotional man who said he loved me yet was too busy to show it. One year later, I realized that even though I'd gotten baptized, Dad still didn't ask me how I was doing, not really, and so God still didn't care. Not really.

Food was dished onto our plates at every meal; again, I had no choice but to finish it. This inability to make my own decisions killed my independent spirit. Mum meant well; as a nutritionist, she served healthy but plentiful portions. As a result, we became healthy but plentiful children.

Meanwhile, a woman I'd become very close to, 'Grandma Ermenie,' passed away. And life became even more uncontrollable, and disappointment, more certain.

I craved what I didn't have: Attention. Affirmation. Choice. My mum had never been affirmed growing up, and therefore battled low self-esteem. My dad found it hard to pay compliments, and was often distracted or absent. While both loved me, I grew up not feeling loved. Not knowing what it meant to be beautiful, cherished, seen or heard. As a result, I wanted nothing else.

It's a scary place to be in, this place where you have no one, so you have to become bigger than life itself, in order to carry yourself through the pain. A nine-year-old isn't very big. And all I wanted was to be small. Because the world told me that thin was beauty. And maybe if I was beautiful, Dad would want to spend time with me.

I didn't know about anorexia nervosa. We weren't allowed to play with Barbie dolls or take dance lessons or look at fashion magazines or talk about our bodies in any way other than holy, so I didn't know anything except that Mum changed in the closet when Dad was in the room, and made us cover our skin head to foot. A kind of shame came with this not talking about bodies and beauty became something forbidden. And I wanted it more than anything. So I stopped eating.

It was a slow-stop, one that began with saying "No," and the "No" felt good. I refused dessert. I refused the meals Mum dished up for me. I refused the jam on my bread and then the margarine and then the bread itself.

This control over food became a gateway to my inner self; the independent spirit I'd been forced to avoid. And I began to enjoy those three tiny parts of my day—breakfast, lunch and supper—in which I could prove I was an individual.

At night, I dreamt of food. Mum would find me, hunting for imaginary chocolates in my bed. I wanted her to hug me and make the fear go away, but was worried that if I did, my guard would be let down and I'd eat real chocolates, so I stopped hugging her for two years.

My legs were getting thin, and that was what mattered, but I dreamt about her arms, and woke up hugging myself.

I slipped from a state of not being hungry to a state of choosing to be hungry. I liked how my pants sagged, how my shirt became loose, my face slim, and my eyes, big. And at some point, I became a different person, intent on being skinny no matter the cost.

GAINING CONTROL

I began to cut down on my daily intake of food. It started with not finishing my meals, which resulted in me not being allowed any dessert.

Unable to register that her daughter had an eating disorder, my mum, born in England, surprised me with a trip to her home-land. While there, I became resigned to bed, sick with the flu; as the flush took to my cheeks and the weight dropped from my arms, legs and face, I began to think how beautiful I was when I was sick. So the flu became an excuse for not eating.

Returning home, I was more fatigued than usual. Mum took me to the doctor's to have my blood tested. The doctor suggested she put her daughter in school. I was ecstatic; finally, a chance to have friends.

But upon arriving at school, I realized with horror how thin the girls were. How large my body compared to theirs. Allowed to make my own lunches, I began to abuse the newfound freedom, packing less and less each day. This resulted in a very angry, tired girl returning home each afternoon.

I was happy to finally be 'normal', but sad about how ugly I felt amongst such beautiful competition. To me, 'thin' represented everything I wasn't—and everything I wanted to be.

The control became addicting, and I became obsessed with 'tiny'. My writing shrunk smaller and smaller until the teachers' eyes hurt from trying to read it. Everything in life had to be orderly and regimented. My bedroom was immaculate; my outfits, scheduled weeks ahead of time, and my journal entries full of intricate details about each day.

PERSONALLY SPEAKING

It was not intended to be an eating disorder. The anorexia started innocently enough, as it does for many. For me, a beauty-seeker, the disease was catalyzed by wanting to be adored and beautiful, but, as it worsened, it turned into an attempt to control my immediate surroundings in an otherwise haphazard world.

Eighty per cent of North American girls ages nine to twelve go on a diet of some form or another, and for most, the diet remains just that—a short-term experiment with cutting down one's food intake.

In a culture that not only worships skinny models but celebrates fast-food chains and over-indulgence, it is easy for children to become confused—caught up in not knowing how to indulge and still remain attractive. And in a culture where family is constantly being de-fragmented, young people rarely find love and acceptance at home, and so, look for it in a media-saturated, bi-polar world.

Certain elements played a role in my choosing to become anorexic. These included, but were not exclusive to:

- being the eldest of four children;
- being a perfectionist;
- having a sensitive, aesthetic heart which didn't know how to process both the pain and the beauty I beheld in the world;
- being born to a mother with low self-esteem, and a father who put ministry before family;
- being a person who craved freedom of choice;

- being refused this 'choice' when my parents decided what I ate at mealtime;
- feeling insecure due to being home-schooled;
- wanting to be found attractive by new public-school friends;
- feeling 'rootless' due to having had so many different homes growing up.

This being said, I had, overall, a very loving and Christian childhood, compared to most. My sisters and brother also underwent a similar upbringing, but did not struggle with anorexia nervosa.

There is no rhyme or reason to the disease; no formula or quick solution. I wish there was, so I could offer that to you. Rather, it is largely dependent on personality and personal choice. I chose to deal with these unstable elements by controlling my eating. Another might choose to cut their hair, dress gothic, lose oneself in music, or do drugs.

Eating disorders are simply this: a cry for help. And it is this cry that I wish to address.

As families, you must not lose sight of the individual doing the harm. While it may seem he or she is doing this to cause you pain, there is more to the eating disorder than meets the eye. This person is hurting, and he or she secretly yearns to be understood.

So, while it is important to take note of the elements affecting your child, look more closely at his or her soul. What components make up this person? How has God made him or her unique? And how, during this scary time, can you help encourage those God-given talents and gifts versus focusing on the negative?

Your child wants to be loved. He or she may not know it, but every refusal to eat is a desperate attempt to draw you close.

Chapter 2: Parents' Perspective

YVONNE'S STORY

“She won’t get out of the bathroom,” Yvonne Dow whispered to her husband Ernest who sat in his study preparing Sunday’s sermon. “She’s been in there for two hours.”

Ernest looked up, brow furrowed, glasses smudged. He sighed. “It’s probably nothing, right? Give her time.”

Yvonne shook her head; stared at the table where her nine-year-old daughter’s supper sat untouched. Once again, Emily had made an excuse about not being hungry. Was she sick? Her face had seemed flushed.

The bathroom door squeaked open, and Yvonne’s eldest daughter emerged in fuzzy pink pajamas making her look far younger than she acted. She glanced over at Yvonne; scowled.

“What are you looking at?” the little girl with a long, thin face, spat. Yvonne didn’t know how to answer. Emily ran upstairs; slammed her bedroom door. The whole house seemed to shake.

“I knew about eating disorders because I studied them in university,” explains Yvonne, a fifty-three-year-old nutritionist. “I just figured no one in my family was going to get one. It was kind of a pride thing.”

Yvonne had read all the right parenting books, served her children nutritious, wholesome meals, and raised them up to know God. She didn’t let them play with Barbies, watch TV or take dance lessons. This left no room for an eating disorder to develop; that only happened to non-Christian families with severe underlying issues. Not to hers. And so, it took a while for Yvonne to realize that indeed, her quiet daughter was starving herself.

“I knew there was a problem when Emily wasn’t eating enough for a normal healthy child to maintain energy levels,” she says.

Emily’s father, Rev. Ernest Dow, says he noticed the anorexia more when his daughter’s temper began to flare up. “She was always timid, quiet and meek—but as her body stretched up without any substance to keep pace with it, it weighed on her temper. That’s when we got the slamming doors and the throwing of things...”

He pauses, trying hard to conjure up feelings long shoved down. “I felt disappointed, puzzled—we were trying to do our best in raising our family, to provide what Emily needed—but she wasn’t eating. And she was getting unhealthily skinny. Also, the rebellion and rage left me at my wit’s end, as Dr. Dobson’s best advice didn’t seem to help. It was scary because we realized (after reading some of what few books on the subject were available in the 1980s) it could be fatal.”

When asked what she thinks caused the anorexia, Yvonne recalls having read that trauma often triggers an eating disorder. “The only thing I can think of is when Grandma Ermenie died. She and Emily had become quite close.”

In addition to the trauma, Yvonne admits to having been a controller. Yvonne realizes now, her daughter needed choice, and regrets trying to fit Emily into a certain ‘mold.’

Ernest says passive pride on his part also played a big role in Emily's downfall. "Also, pressure for my children to be raised a certain way because they were pastor's kids—and we believed that because we home-schooled our children, they would turn out differently from the others."

FACTORS TO WEIGH IN

No parent is to blame for his/her child's eating disorder. I cannot stress this enough. Children have freedom of choice, and it was by choosing to diet that your child opened him/herself up to the temptation of disordered eating.

It is important that you, as parents, believe this, so you might be able to help your sick child. If you do not believe this, and continue to blame and berate yourself, you will, ironically, only contribute to the factors that instigated your child's eating disorder in the first place.

A child derives his or her sense of worth largely from his/her parents. So, while you may have said or done things in the past that caused your little one to question his/her identity somehow, now is the time to believe in yourself.

We understand how challenging this may be, as having a sick child is humbling and for some, embarrassing. But now, more than ever, you need to believe that God made you a beautiful and wonderful creation, so that you might help instill confidence and life back into your son or daughter.

So, in order to help breathe healing back into this child of yours, first seek healing for yourself. Ask God to show you where your identity has been broken, fragmented or bruised, and invite Him to work in your life to create a confident, caring, loving person who can then serve his/her family.

Here are some traits, in particular, which contribute to eating disordered children, and which God longs to deliver you from.

(a) Ego

As my father admitted earlier, passive or aggressive pride can severely damage one's children, for pride prevents one from becoming like a child, and it is only within that position that one can truly love and understand a little one.

If a child does not feel understood, he/she begins to question him/herself, and wonder if he/she is valuable at all. No matter how many times a parent insists "I love you," a child feels loved only when a parent takes the time to know him/her.

From the moment a child is born, everything seems strange save for family. Children are learning and absorbing new and wonderful and intimidating facts and faces on a daily basis.

It's crucial, therefore, to keep *your* face close and familiar. Make yours a welcome presence in your child's life by allowing yourself to become child-like. Reach down and hug your child as much as possible; sit down and play Legos or dolls or draw a picture with your little one; slow down so you might hear your child's whisper, his/her cries for help, and his/her craving to be nurtured and needed.

(b) Hedonism and Asceticism

In today's affluent, North American culture, many believers struggle with pleasuring the flesh. As hedonists, they overindulge in food, material goods, and even sexuality. Then, there are those that verge to the other extreme in order to escape the ways of this world—the ascetics, who believe in self-denial and strict restraint.

This term defined my father. He was the kind to salvage any piece of food in spite of mold, to hoard bits of rope and wire, to wash cling-wrap and re-use it, to wear long-johns until they literally fell apart, to wear purple slippers from Winners, to make milk out of skim powder, and to duct-tape cardboard to the van window when it broke.

This would have been fine, except that his wife and children were forced into the same lifestyle. Being British, and frugal, my mum—Yvonne—easily adapted, for her father had been the same way. Every week she cooked up Saturday Stew, a conglomeration of the week's leftovers mixed together, so as not to waste. She re-used tea-bags at least four times, and insisted the family eat homemade granola every day except Christmas, when the children were allowed small boxes of cereal.

Orange juice was regulated to half a glass each day. She and Ernest wore hand-me-downs from Salvation Army, and bought hand-me-downs for the children for Christmas and birthdays. (To be fair, we were poor. And while my parents attempted to be wise with their income, they also 'splurged' frequently on Sundays after church, when they'd stop by Baker's Dozen and buy a bag of day-old donuts. These treasured acts were not lost on their children.)

When one is in ministry, as my dad was, and living below the poverty line, it's common to set high standards for oneself in the name of 'resourcefulness', and tempting to become a martyr to the cause. But, as I can testify, no child feels it is fair to drag them into a parent's 'righteous cause.'

In a twisted sense, I used my parents' own asceticism against them, proving that self-denial was in fact, deadly and destructive. Embarrassed by my father's purple shoes and the duct-taped Voyager van; angered that I could only have half a glass of orange juice a day, and was forced to drink skim milk powder and eat granola every morning, I rebelled, refusing to partake in my parents' guidelines and setting my own, stricter set of rules to combat them.

And so, considering this, I urge you to re-evaluate your lifestyle. Do you live to an extreme? Do you practice hedonism, or asceticism? If so, ask God to help you balance your indulgences in regards to eating and spending.

If you tend towards asceticism, challenge yourself by asking why you need to be so self-denying. What are you afraid of? Then, dare to let go and trust God when you throw away that piece of rope.

If it's hedonism you struggle with, again, ask yourself why you feel the need to fill your life with physical pleasures? Remember that we can take nothing material or edible with us—the material, in fact, can keep us from experiencing the spiritual. Finally, ask someone to keep you accountable as you strive for a balanced lifestyle, so you might be a positive example of moderation for your offspring.

(c) Low Self-esteem

My mother struggled with low self-esteem, and her children knew this. She blushed fierce whenever Dad tried to kiss her in public and pushed him away for fear someone would see.

Being from Britain, she was very proper, and insisted on changing in her bedroom closet so Dad could not see. She wore shirts that buttoned high to the neck, skirts and pants whose hems brushed the floor, and ‘skorts’ instead of shorts, encouraging her children to do the same. The birds and the bees were not discussed; rather, they were shoved under the door of our bedrooms through the form of a book. And jealousy was a frequent visitor, as Dad put parishioners’ needs before those of his wife and children.

Your children are watching you, observing how you respond to life, to people, and to situations. They see you for who you truly are. Learn to love yourself. Ask God for the strength to let go of old baggage, to refuse anything the enemy might be whispering into your ear and to believe—to truly, utterly, believe—that you are valuable. Just as you are. Then, you will shine, and your children will notice, feeling bold and proud because you emanate beauty.

(d) High Expectations

While Mum battled low self-esteem, Dad fostered high expectations of both his wife and family. He expected that, in public, his family would wear their suits and dresses, plaster on smiles, and stay silent. Without a healthy outlet, both wife and children felt smothered by a role they hadn’t chosen: that of a pastor’s family. This false front made it painful for my parents to admit to outsiders that they needed help when I became ill; by doing so, they were admitting their “Dr. James Dobson” form of parenting wasn’t working, and their happy-go-lucky faces were in fact, masks.

It seems we’ve forgotten that Jesus came for the sick and the dying. He came to seek the lost sheep, not the flock dressed in pressed suits and fake smiles. So, check your expectations at the door; they may be subconscious, but your children will sense them. Submit those expectations to God, asking Him to forgive you, humble you, and help you accept your family the way they are, versus the way you think they should be. Then, and only then, will your offspring be free to flourish in their God-given identities.

(e) Poor Communication

Raised in a family where his mother was seen and not heard, it took years for my father to recognize his wife had a voice she longed to use. Thus, when it came to talking about heart-felt matters such as their child’s anorexia, both of my parents remained silent in the beginning, believing it best to swallow one’s thoughts and continue as if all was normal. Yet communication, as the next chapter addresses, is the key to establishing a healthy relationship with each other and with one’s children. And children long to see their parents happy.

So re-evaluate your connection with your spouse; take time to come before the Lord, together, asking Him to heal your marriage—whichever parts may be scarred or hurting. Unveil your secrets to one another, and care deeply about the other. Only then, as a united front, can you properly steer the ship which is your family.

A PARENT'S ROLE

(a) Have Healthy, Happy Children

- Give your children the freedom to make small yet definite choices. Areas in which they can be shown lenience include dishing up food, choosing what they will wear, and selecting their own hobbies.
- Allow them to make mistakes. Only then will they learn.
- Don't demand; discuss—particularly in the areas of faith, friends and entertainment (TV, Play Station, and the computer). This will keep your children from feeling the need to rebel, because they know that you respect them and their opinions, in spite of their youth.
- Don't base your parenting style on someone else's; instead, base it on the wisdom God gives you.
- Don't keep a weigh scale or an unnecessary amount of mirrors or fashion magazines in your house.
- Don't make comments about people's size or weight. Instead, remark on attributes which you hope will shine through your own children: character, integrity, and other facets of inner beauty.
- Look your children in the eyes when they are talking to you, and reiterate what they are saying to help them feel validated and listened to.
- Compliment and encourage your children on a regular basis. Mothers, remind your husbands and sons to affirm your daughters.
- Know your child's love language, be it gifts, words of affirmation, acts of service, quality time, or physical touch. Make an effort to demonstrate this particular form of love each day.
- Let your children be children. Don't give them more chores than necessary; encourage play as well as work.
- Be available. Make time to play with your children.
- Have an open-door policy when it comes to bedrooms, so no one has secrets.
- Pray for your little ones daily, that God's Spirit would guide their decisions, and that angels would protect their minds and their hearts.
- Teach your children that God's love is a gift, not an obligation.
- Consider the uniqueness of each child; recognize his/her gifts and encourage them, accordingly.
- Finally, exert healthy self-confidence. Avoid talking negatively about yourself, and teach your children to believe in themselves.

(b) Love Your Sick Child

- Pray for healing for your child on a daily, even hourly, basis.
- Pray for wisdom, that God would guide you as a parent and give you humility, understanding and unending patience.

- Apologize to your child (for the ways you've tried to control him in the past; for the ways in which you've hurt him; for forcing him to grow up too fast; for refusing to acknowledge or encourage him; for not listening to him); then, ask for forgiveness.
- Consider the roots of the illness: What factors triggered it? What is your child trying to say to you? How can you help your child feel "in control" of her own life? How can you support her during this time, without making her feel threatened?
- Recognize your child's gifts and talents, and encourage him in those (in the hopes he/ will begin to find his identity somewhere other than the ED).
- Keep in mind, your child doesn't want help; she wants hope—hope that one day, things won't be this hard; hope that one day, you will be her friend and you will understand.
- As hard as it is to watch your child refuse to eat, don't try to fix the illness unless it's life-threatening. Rather, try to get to know your son/daughter again. Work on re-establishing that relationship and tearing down walls. The problem, most likely, lies in years of feeling abandoned and out of control (eating disorders are often the result of a deep hurt, and stem from not wanting to get hurt again).
- Keep all talk regarding your own appearance and that of others' positive and uplifting. Avoid discussing body size, weight, or calories.

(c) Love Your Other Children

No matter how acute your child's condition; no matter the signs that prove she is struggling with eating, it is essential not to forget your other children. This will no doubt be challenging, as your ill child demands attention on a consistent basis, but if the others are ignored, they too will begin to take extreme measures in order to be noticed.

(d) Make Mealtimes Merry

Eating together at least once a day provides the opportunity for holy interaction; it solidifies a family, opening up hearts around food and using the sharing of plate and cup to unify. Food is meant for the coming-together of believers; for communion. God designed it to be so. He desires fellowship across the tablecloth. Eating disorders rob a family of this meal-time unity. They destroy the peacefulness of gathering together; the beauty of being one, and make each family member yearn for solitude. God is present in the gathering of His people. Satan delights in dividing. This, I believe, is one of his key goals through eating disorders—to steal away the sanctuary of mealtime.

Mealtimes are tricky. Knowing when to respond, and when to stay quiet, requires prayer. When a child is refusing to eat at the table, thereby disturbing the harmony and causing siblings to worry about calories and whether or not they, too, are 'fat,' parents may either a) make too big a deal of it, and catalyze regular fights at the dinner-table, or b) try to ignore the matter altogether in an attempt to treat each child fairly.

It is important to understand that children know when something is wrong. Children are often wise beyond their years, and are desperate for two things: affirmation and knowledge. Constantly learning, they wonder why their sibling—who in many cases may be the older one—is refusing to eat, and when did food become bad?

As much as it might pain you, make an effort to keep mealtimes light and fun. You can address your child's refusal to eat following the meal, but don't make it a bigger issue than it needs to be. Rather, acknowledge the difficulty, then focus hard on the other children, asking about their day, what might have made them smile, and what upset them.

Make it your goal to get to know your children over the steaming plates of food. Make an effort to smile and speak in loving, quiet tones, no matter the anxiety of your heart. And God will bless you for walking, so, in faith. He will mend your broken heart and He will heal, in His timing. By trusting this, and acting in prayerful love for your other children, you will find reward.

(e) Talk About It

I'd like to urge you, as parents, to use this painful situation to communicate freely with each child; to teach your family about anorexia and to hide nothing, for in hiding, one merely creates tension and bitterness.

My family held monthly meetings in which my father sketched out the budget on an easel and asked if anyone had questions. While this was good, I longed for him to simply set down the calculator, crouch to my level, and see my tear-filled eyes.

There was an elephant in the room that could not be ignored, yet somehow, he and my mum managed to. They pretended nothing was wrong. But something was. And the elephant only grew larger (or thinner, as one might want to look at it) the longer it was ignored.

Be honest with your children. Talk about the issue at bedtime, one-on-one with your offspring. Talk about it as you drive them to soccer practice or swimming lessons. Take them out for cinnamon buns, as my dad did in later years. Most parents don't want to admit they don't know something; they don't want to appear weak in front of their children, but remember, God is present in our weakness.

With this in mind, admit to your children when you are/have been wrong. Go to the Lord, seeking truth about your situation and what you need to ask forgiveness for. Then, confess your sins to your children. It will help them to know that you, too, are scared; that you, too, are human. But that God is still God, and He is still very much in control.

(f) Keep 'em Young

Your non-anorexic children are being forced to witness a very mature issue at a very young age; anorexia is an adult-illness, for the most part, and forces children to grow up fast. Do everything you can to keep them young. Sing to them; tell jokes even when the air is taut with tension, and spend time making crafts, eating ice cream, playing in parks, dancing long dances and dreaming big dreams. Read stories to them and help them develop the colors of their imagination in a house black with suffering. And most importantly, love them.

(g) Affirm and Educate

As mentioned earlier, children yearn for affirmation and education. Keeping this in mind, make an effort to compliment each of them sincerely, every day. This will take a lot of strength and vision, seeing past your own pain to the beauty of the people around you, but as their faces light up with the affirmation, you will realize—it pays to notice.

Ask God for His eyes, to see the unique traits in all of your children and to give you a heart for each of them, as you may be feeling sapped dry by your anorexic child. Ask the Lord to overflow you with strength, so you might invest in each of your family members. And ask Him for wisdom to know how to best guide your family into a healing place. Part of this healing can come through learning together. Borrow books from the library on anorexia. Rent DVDs. Educate yourselves and your children. Don't leave them in the dark. You are all suffering. Use this time to bond together—not against the ill child, but *for* him or her.

(h) Inspire Compassion

It may feel as though your child is out to 'get you'—that she is choosing each day to enter into fits of rage and obstinacy. And in some ways, she is. But deep down, the intent is not to hurt you. Deep down, she is battling feelings and thoughts she doesn't really understand.

As hard as it may be to believe, anorexia is a mental illness, and even the beginning stages need to be treated seriously. With this in mind, counsel your children to treat it similarly. Protect your sick child by upholding his/her name in front of the others. Do not commend the way he is acting, but explain that this is an illness that needs to be treated with compassion and love.

Healing cannot come about in any other way. Urge your children to their knees on behalf of their sibling. And, particularly following a big fight, call the others together and pray on your child's behalf, using prayer for no means other than to beseech the heart of God.

Chapter 4: Professional Perspective

THE DOCTOR'S DIAGNOSIS

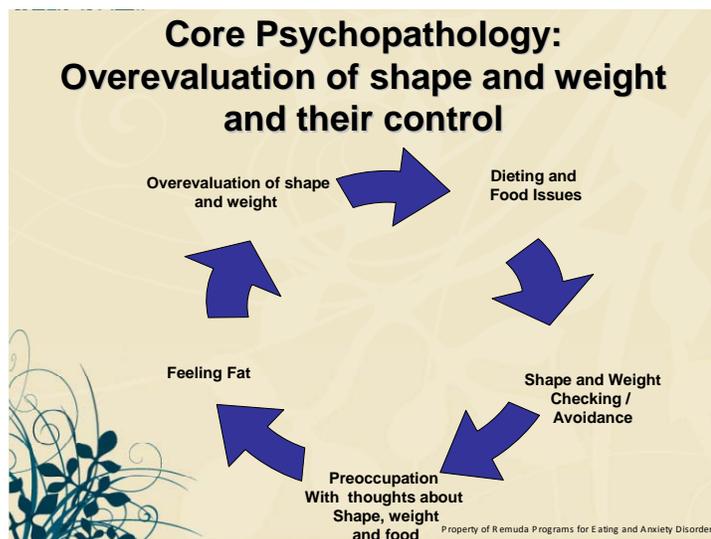
1. Blue Genes

Dr. Dena Cabrera, Psy.D., Clinical Director of Adolescent Services at Rosewood's Centers for Eating Disorders and former psychologist at Arizona's Remuda Ranch, has not only dealt with eating disorders for the past two decades, but been instrumental in developing a program for patients with acute anorexia nervosa. She believes eating disorders can be traced, to an extent, to one's genetics.

"Anorexia is a complex disorder with multiple triggers and influencing factors," she says. "There is a significant role genetic factors play into the development of anorexia. There is not one gene for anorexia or one gene for bulimia but instead, there is a host of genes that code for proteins which influence traits that make one vulnerable to this disorder."

Such traits include low self-esteem, perfectionism, need for exact order, harm avoidance and anxiety. Yet one's environment, Cabrera says, also largely figures into the disease, taking into account the following factors:

- Family attitudes and behaviors regarding food, including parental modeling of thinness, weight, and shape issues;
- Family's *non-verbal and verbal* responses to their bodies and child's body;
- Parental history of being overweight or dieting;
- Perceived parental pressure to be slender and to control weight/shape;
- General family function (Competitive? Communicative?);
- Physical contact (i.e., affection, boundaries, verbal and nonverbal expression of love);
- Peer influences—dieting, weight talk, teasing;
- Psychiatric / psychological issues—*anxiety* (which almost always precedes the onset of an eating disorder), depression, lack of resilience, emotional deregulation (which is at the core of eating disorders, trauma, and substance abuse issues);
- Body image dissatisfaction (over-evaluation of weight and shape which drives the eating disorder behaviors)



- Socio-cultural influences, such as unrealistic standards of beauty placed upon by the media.

2. Diagnostic Criteria

When diagnosing a disordered eater for admittance into Remuda, Cabrera follows the DSM-IV diagnostic criteria of mental disorders:

(a) **Refusal to maintain body weight** at or above a minimally normal weight for age and height (i.e., weight loss leading to maintenance of body weight less than eighty-five percent of that expected; or failure to make expected weight gain during period of growth, leading to body weight less than eighty-five percent of that expected).

(b) **Intense fear of gaining weight** or becoming fat, even though underweight.

(c) **Disturbance in the way in which one's body weight or shape is experienced**, undue influence of body weight or shape on self-evaluation, or denial of the seriousness of the current low body weight.

(d) **In post-menarcheal females, amenorrhea**; i.e., the absence of at least three consecutive menstrual cycles. (A woman is considered to have amenorrhea if her periods occur only following hormone, i.e., estrogen, administration.)

3. Helpful Tips

Upon recognizing the symptoms of an eating disorder in one's child, Cabrera recommends taking the following steps:

- Learn all you can about eating disorders.
- Don't expect your child to acknowledge the problem or embrace your help. He may feel extremely threatened by the thought of giving up the dysfunctional eating behavior.
- Don't believe your child's claim that he does not need professional help.
- Obtain treatment for your child.
- Seek help only from healthcare professionals/facilities that specialize in eating disorders.
- Be patient. Treatment takes time; recovery may take months or years and involve relapses.
- Participate in family therapy as recommended by treatment providers.
- In conflicts about decisions, do not retreat from your position for fear that your child will become more ill. Your child needs clear, kind, and decisive communication.
- Maintain a supportive, confident, hopeful posture.
- Express honest affection verbally and physically; your child needs to know that he is loved.
- Talk with your child about personal issues other than food and weight.
- Do not demand weight gain or berate your child for having an eating disorder.

- Do not become your child's policeman. If you see a change in your child's weight or behavior, call his or her counselor or physician.
- Expect your child to be responsible for her actions by replacing food that was binged on and cleaning up messes (bathroom, kitchen, etc.).
- Expect your child to be with the family during mealtimes, but do not demand that she eat.
- Do not let your child decide what the family eats for dinner. Do not allow her eating disorder dominate the family's eating schedule or use of the kitchen. Do not allow her to shop or cook for the family. Don't purchase or prepare food only for her.
- Do not make mealtime a battle of wills.
- Do not watch the person when eating, or make comments about food.
- Do not apologize for or make excuses for the person's eating habits.
- Do not play nutritionist. Do not give detailed food and nutrition-related advice. Model and talk about balance and moderation.
- Do not read your child's journal.
- Do not catastrophize. Do not say, "Your illness is damaging the whole family... I can't take much more of this." Catastrophic statements may encourage more eating disorder behavior.
- Do not say, "Help me to help you!" or "What can I do for you?" These statements suggest that the child knows what he needs to heal from the eating disorder, when he does not.
- Do not allow your child to disrupt your life through manipulation, arguments, threats, blame, guilt, bribes, or resentment.
- Do not feel guilty or waste time figuring out the cause of the eating disorder or assigning blame. Remember that families neither cause nor cure eating disorders.
- Do not try to protect your child from the natural consequences of the eating disorder. The pain it causes to your child and others will (hopefully) motivate recovery.
- Be limitless in supporting and encouraging every hint of recovery that you see.
- Do not put your child's needs before your own. Do not exhaust yourself. Take care of yourself for the long journey of recovery, modeling balance and health.
- Pray and trust God for the outcome.

THE COUNSELOR'S CASE

1. Power-Play

Power struggles concerning food or body weight are strong indicators of a problem, says Len Thompson, B.R.A., M.A., the former director of Northern Christian Counseling Services in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, and one of three professionals involved in my diagnosis.

Spiritually, these power struggles suggest something has gone wrong in the formation of the child's concept of personal identity. "Satan provides alluring lies to the (disordered eater) that control of power is the perfect solution to their perceived loss of legitimate autonomy, rather than a loving relationship of trust with Christ," Thompson says.

This 'control of power' can manifest itself through monitoring body weight, food intake, family dynamics, exercise, and depending on others' perceptions and emotions to compensate for a validated sense of identity.

2. Spiritually Speaking

God desires for each of His creations to develop a healthy ability to make choices, express desires and preferences, as well as feel emotions and think independently, Thompson states, so we might reflect His image.

Satan desires, in turn, to rob God's creation of these abilities, providing "an almost irresistible substitute for true identity—power."

To combat Satan's attempts, Thompson encourages parents to adopt the parenting style of God the Father. "He always gives us choices even if He doesn't like the choices we make. He affirms our creativity and encourages self-expression. He is always ready to hear our concerns, disappointments and pain."

God never tries to steal His children's identity. In the same way, Thompson says, parents should try to allow for an honest expression of their child's personality—as much as it might hurt them. This acceptance is what a child craves; this kind of unconditional love.

3. Small Steps

While meeting with my parents and me, Thompson recalls little advances proved giant landmarks; these milestones included allowing me to decorate my room, letting me choose which television program I wanted to watch (as negotiated by Mum and Dad), writing in my diary or journal without either parent reading it, and purchasing my own clothes versus putting up with hand-me-downs.

"It is very important for parents to consider how their child's identity is faring in the transition from childhood to adulthood," he says.

4. Issues at Hand

In the midst of striving to love one's eating disordered child, Thompson warns that issues can arise, hindering a parent's advancement. For example, one might feel powerless to give his/her child choices in light of the needs of other family members.

"Sometimes the health of someone else in the family might take center-stage, but a parent must find creative ways to enlist the community's help to make sure that each child gets emotional attention," he says.

Another issue Thompson has observed is that of feeling powerless to give one's ill child choices due to the pressure of serving God. "God *does* ask for our sacrifices," he says, "but never at the expense of our children's identities."

No matter a person's ministerial position, there is no excuse for one's family to be exploited by way of monetary neglect, verbal abuse from parishioners or malicious gossip.

"I'd like to empower parents to act *for* their children rather than feeling obligated to sacrifice them."

Satan, says Thompson, is very active in this regard—twisting efforts made in the name of ministry. "There are times when leaving an organization or a church is the right thing to do for the sake of your children, and there is nothing to feel guilty about in that situation."

Parents also sometimes feel powerless to connect with their eating disordered child, due to guilt over their young one's situation. While repentance may be needed for some choices a parent has made, the eating disorder itself is not a parent's fault. It is the choice of the child, and the child's anger stems not from blaming the parent, but from the authority figure which the parent represents.

"I can remember telling Emily's parents to be patient," says Thompson, "and not to doubt that Emily loved them, but I think they thought I was making that up because she sometimes told them how angry she was."

Yet, in spite of my anger, I was entrusting my parents with my feelings—negative as they were—and this was, in fact, a positive sign.

Thompson recalls urging my father to connect with me through notes, science fairs, writing in a special journal for me to read, and talking with me. "It took a lot for both to believe the relationship could be redeemed," he recalls. "I spent a fair bit of time encouraging them and reminding them that God was still working."

Because He is, Thompson says. Working. Even when a child is screaming in his parents' faces, cursing the day they were born; even when a plate of food slams into a wall and both parent and child run to their bedrooms weeping, God is working.

Yet the strain can become too much—the anger and grief too trying—resulting in parents feeling powerless to connect with God. "It can be invaluable for parents to seek deep, soul conversations with godly people who can help them with their despair," stresses Thompson. "God weeps over the damage done by an eating disorder, and often parents need someone to weep with them."

It is essential, he adds, for parents and siblings to demonstrate care for one another during this time, for it is in this demonstration of love that God's presence can be felt. "We don't know what God is up to, but if we learn to listen, the relationship with God can be restored and we can hear Him speak."

5. Love is the Answer

To prevent the illness from spreading further, Thompson encourages families to focus on loving the individual versus analyzing food intake or calories. "Showing a disordered eater that he/she is valuable is so important. Express love constantly; listen to the heart, and validate identity."

By doing so, the child will have less reason to express his/her anger through starvation. "Constant reminders of love weaken Satan's power."

6. Listening Prayer

And finally, instead of preaching at one's child, Thompson suggests the spiritual exercise of listening prayer. "If we can hear God communicate the specific thing that needs to be done each day, what could be more important?" he says. "Prayer that allows us to see through God's eyes is much different from prayer that demands God do what we think is best."