

Eating Disorders: It's More than **FOOD**

■ by Marissa DeGroot, MSW, LSW

What does your relationship with food look like?

Food is an inevitable part of the world that we live in. Food is a basic human need given by God, dating back to biblical times with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Food has also become the center of many social gatherings, work parties, and other events in the world around us. It is ingrained in every aspect of society. For approximately 20 million women and 10 million men¹, their relationship and behaviors with food are unhealthy. This unhealthy relationship with food is seen with those who suffer with an eating disorder.

What is an eating disorder?

According to the National Eating Disorder Association (NEDA), "Eating disorders are serious but treatable mental and physical illnesses that can affect people of every age, sex, gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic group"¹.

There are a variety of eating disorders affecting millions across the world. According to the DSM-V, a manual mental health professionals use to determine a diagnosis, there are several types of eating disorders, including Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia Nervosa, Binge Eating, PICA, and Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake, each with a variety of different behaviors. Many individuals do not fall neatly into one disorder and may display behaviors of multiple disorders.

Eating Disorder behaviors could include overeating, dieting behaviors, restricting food intake, restriction of fluids, compensatory behaviors to prevent weight gain such as excessive exercise, purging, and abuse of laxatives or diuretics².

It is also important not to take one's outward appearance to decipher if someone has an eating disorder. Many individuals who have eating disorders may appear healthy on the outside yet this does not indicate that there is not an issue. The behaviors indicated above only begin to describe eating disorder behaviors and it is important to note that eating disorders also involve other physical, emotional, and mental indicators.

What lies beneath an unhealthy relationship with food?

While eating disorders revolve around a person's relationship with food, for most, an eating disorder is not just about the food. In reality, if eating disorders were simply about food, it would make treatment and recovery more straightforward. Eating disorders often serve as a way to numb feelings and emotions to harm, to control things, and to manage emotional distress. An eating disorder often indicates other underlying issues that need to be addressed that are manifested through issues with food.

- Continued on Page 2 -



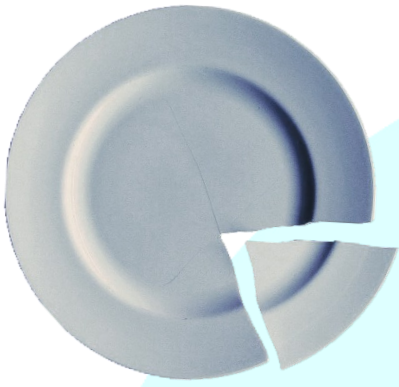
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- Continued from Page 1 -

Treatment and Recovery

Recovery from an eating disorder is possible with proper help and support. Early detection and treatment are vital. Treatment and recovery involves the whole person - physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. Individual and group therapy, dietary needs and assessment, medical assessment, psychiatric monitoring, and our faith in God are critical components in one's recovery process.

As believers, allowing God to play a part in the recovery process helps those struggling with an eating disorder to surrender to something that is bigger than themselves and bigger than their disorder. Eating disorders are so often about power and control.

When we begin to trust God and turn the power and control of an eating disorder over to Him, recovery begins to look much different. God can help heal the underlying issues that have contributed to the eating disorder in the first place. Remember, eating disorders involve much more than one's relationship with food. Letting God into the recovery process allows individuals to experience healing and the sense of wholeness that their eating disorder has taken from them.



Does my loved one have an eating disorder?

Are you wondering if your friend or loved one may have an eating disorder? NEDA identifies seven main signs¹ that loved ones could look for.

- Weight concerns
- Altering exercise regimen
- Not eating what others are eating
- Not eating what is prepared for them
- Odd behaviors before or after meals
- Appearing more depressed, anxious, or irritable
- Loss of energy

Family and friends play a key role in someone seeking the help they need. Educating yourself about eating disorders and expressing your thoughts about your loved one in a concerning and supportive manner is an important part of the process. You can educate yourself by learning information about eating disorders from the National Eating Disorder Association (NEDA) and the resources they offer. Encouraging your loved one to seek help from a professional such as a Christian therapist or dietician who specializes in eating disorders is a critical way that you can support your loved one. It is also helpful for loved ones to seek therapy during this time to navigate their own feelings and concerns in a healthy way. ■



Marissa DeGroot is a Licensed Social Worker and sees clients in our Orland Park and Tinley Park, IL locations.

¹"What Are Eating Disorders?" National Eating Disorders Association, 7 Aug. 2018, www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/what-are-eating-disorders.

²American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing.

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