



STARVING TO MEASURE UP

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They gaze at themselves in the mirror and feel profound dissatisfaction. They starve themselves or binge on food and then purge. They feel ugly no matter what others say. They feel that they fall short of American ideal. They do not look like the current Hollywood “it” girl.

They are the 11 million US women and girls that struggle with an eating disorder.

Even though all God’s children are “fearfully and wonderfully made,” more people than ever before battle an eating disorder like anorexia or bulimia.

In decades past, an eating disorder stereotype existed. This person was female, white, first-born, high-achieving and from an affluent family. Not anymore; eating disorders now flourish in every culture, race, ethnicity, class, birth order and religion. Christians are not exempt from this. Anorexia (self-starvation) and bulimia (binging and purging) are rampant in the church today.

Eating Disorders Defined

There are many misconceptions about eating disorders: what they are, why they occur, their symptoms and prognosis. Some assume that eating disorders are exclusively about being overweight or underweight, or that they are just a fad that will pass in due time. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Eating disorders—specifically anorexia and bulimia—are psychiatric illnesses, not unlike depression. Food is not the real issue, but rather a variety of emotional, relational and spiritual issues cause the abnormal treatment of food. Anorexics starve themselves to dangerously thin levels, and bulimics consume enormous amounts of food, and then purge it from their bodies, usually through vomiting. Anorexic or bulimic behavior serves a distorted purpose in the victim’s life. Though these behaviors are objectively bizarre, they make complete sense to the one who is doing them. It is critical to understand that this behavior is not only strange, but dangerous and even life-threatening. More people die from

eating disorders than any other mental illness, survivors often experience profound and permanent medical consequences.

The WHY of Eating Disorders

The motivations behind an eating disorder are as varied as their victims. The trigger may be as simple as a divorce in the family, or as complex as sexual abuse in childhood. In Christian circles, a culture of perfectionism often triggers eating disorders—more than one might think. Adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable to this. By definition, teens are extremely insecure, self-critical and emotionally volatile. They may feel the pressure to be a perfect daughter, student and child of God. This need for perfection extends to their physical appearance; in their minds, this means they must be thin. What begins as restricting food and obsessively tracking calories can lead to full-blown anorexia. Binge-purge behavior is often used as a way to cope with the stress of trying to achieve perfection.

Adolescents are not the only ones at risk. Females of all ages fall victim to the pressure to be perfect every single day. The unrealistic, self-inflicted expectations of perfection are unattainable, and this truth only exacerbates the problem. The images put forth in magazines are doctored beyond the point of possibility, and as Christians we know that God is the true standard of perfection and *everyone* falls short of that without His grace.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Do Not Ignore the Problem

Eating Disorders are progressive, worsening with time, and creating devastating consequences for the victim and the family. Church leaders regularly have hurting families coming through their doors, yet hold back commentary for fear of causing offense. Sometimes it is just easier to look the other way.

Let Grace Prevail

Acceptance of imperfection without Biblical compromise is essential to promoting a healthy culture of grace. Many women with eating disorders come from legalistic church and family environments that lack the application of God's grace. These types of situations tend to stress outward appearance and behavior at the expense of inward transformation.

Know the Signs

Look for signs of an eating disorder. Excessive skinniness and sudden weight loss are typical anorexia symptoms, and scrapes on the knuckles, swollen cheeks, and broken blood vessels in the eyes are telltale signs of bulimia.

Education is Key

Educate your staff and especially your youth on the signs and symptoms of eating disorders. Contact a professional resource like Remuda Ranch for materials and speakers. Make sure your women's

ministry and youth groups discuss the issue and have safe, confidential resources for people to seek for help.

Do Something About It

If an eating disorder is suspected in the congregation, steps should be taken. The leader who has the strongest relationship with the person should be the one to confront the issue. This should occur in at a relaxed, non-stressful time and place.

The following tips may prove helpful:

- Express your concern.
- State what your observations and list the evidence of the problem.
- Be compassionate and listen.
- Understand that eating disorders are often based on feelings, not facts or logic.
- Base your conversation around overall health, not just weight.
- Communicate your conviction that the situation should, at the very least, receive a professional evaluation.
- Offer tangible help—with a referral, information or emotional support.
- Ask to pray together for well-being and for wisdom.
- Make sure you work with the family, providing education and assistance.

Always remember that eating disorders are real diseases, and extremely dangerous. If you need more information or help, please contact Remuda Ranch Programs for Eating and Anxiety Disorders at www.remudaranch.com or 1-800-445-1900.

The Remuda Ranch facilities offer a Christ-centered treatment program with a national reputation of success.