Anorexia & Bulimia

Control That Is Out of Control

By June Hunt

August 30, 1997 . . . . The beautiful young Princess of Wales came to the untimely end of her life in a twisted vehicle of death. Heartrending grief from around the world shocked the Royal Palace. A sea of flowers and oceans of tears stunned the stoic British Royalty. Why this deluge of emotion from so many people who never really knew Diana personally? Why did the whole world pause with such overflow of grief to mourn a lovely photographic icon? Clearly she was more than just an object of popularity and gossip. Diana communicated depth and vulnerability and the sadness of having lost control over her own life. Who has not experienced feeling out of control? Instead of being self-focused, however, she became focused on others. Despite her own personal struggles, she reached out and touched the ill, the lepers and the dying . . . she cared from her heart.

Rom 12:21

DEFINITIONS

The eyes of the world were riveted on England as the death of Princess Diana stirred profound interest in the details of her life. Of paramount interest was her struggle with an eating disorder. Reports depicted the Princess as having a monumental appetite, yet pictures portrayed a beautiful woman who was “stylishly” thin. Eventually, in public interviews she admitted to the world her bouts with bulimia. Both anorexia and bulimia are addictive behaviors, yet both are part of a syndrome of suffering that is never beyond God’s healing hand.

Jer 17:14

A. What Is Anorexia?

- Anorexia is a psychological eating disorder characterized by compulsive, chronic self-starvation.¹
- The Greek word from which anorexia is derived means “without appetite.”² When the body goes without nourishment for a period of time, the instinctive desire to eat will disappear.
  — Anorexia is psychological in that the mind pictures a distorted image of what the body looks like and produces an abnormal fear of weight gain.
  — Anorexia is a disorder in which the normal function of the mind and/or body is disturbed. Anorexics weigh less than their ideal body weight, which is different for every person (based on bone structure and the amount of muscle). Body weight that is 15 percent below normal poses a serious threat to physical health.³

“What roles do ego and vanity play in anorexia?”
None. Ego is not the issue. Anorexics eat less and less in an effort to become smaller and smaller because of their self-effacing desire to simply disappear. Deep-rooted insecurity is at the root of anorexia.

“Why are anorexics so bent on destroying themselves?”

Their negative thinking patterns have them convinced that they don’t deserve to live . . . that their longing for love is not realistic—that they have made too many mistakes. In the acute stage of the disease, many try to burn themselves in hot showers, jump out of buildings or cut themselves. Others just become so exhausted from fighting the mental battles that they see no hope for themselves and give up trying to get better.

Prov 13:12

B. What Is Bulimia?

In the period of history known as the Greco-Roman era, lifestyles of the opulent included lavish feasts and banquets, unabashed indulgences and orgies. People would eat until they could eat no more, then go to what was called “the vomitorium” where they would expel the food they had eaten. Afterward, they would return to the food and begin eating again. If a person couldn’t vomit on his own, a slave was assigned to assist in purging the food. Today we don’t have vomitoriums, but we do have “bingeing and purging”—a pattern characteristic of bulimia.

• The Greek word boulimia means “great hunger.” The constant and abnormal appetite of a bulimic is an emotional hunger that no amount of food can fill. The hunger that bulimics have is not necessarily a physical hunger. They binge in an effort to fill their inner needs and then purge to get rid of the guilt for eating too much as well as to maintain or lose more weight.

• Bulimia is a psychological eating disorder characterized by repeated or sporadic “binge and purge” episodes.
  — Bingeing is an unrestrained consumption of large amounts of food in any setting.
  — Purging may be done by the the intentional vomiting of food or by the use of laxatives.

“What’s the difference between overeating and bulimia?”

An overeater may have little concern about being overweight, while the bulimic is consumed with body image and self-loathing.

Rom 7:24

• Do you feel out of control?

Phil 3:19

• If so, turn to Jesus.

Phil 3:20-21

C. What Is Compulsion?

• Compulsion is a persistent drive or an irresistible impulse to behave in ways that tend to become irrational.

• A person with an eating disorder feels the compulsion to eliminate food or fat by a variety of means—strict dieting and fasting, self-induced vomiting and emetics, multiple laxatives and
diuretics, and strenuous physical exercise.
— A diuretic is a drug that causes an increase in the flow of urine.\(^8\)
— A laxative is a drug that causes bowel elimination.
— An emetic is a drug that causes vomiting.\(^9\)

“How do I know if I have a compulsive eating disorder?”

Ask yourself this question, Do I feel a compulsion to avoid the intake of food or to eliminate food or fat, and does that compulsion now have mastery over me? Those struggling with anorexia and bulimia feel enslaved—they know they are not free.

2 Peter 2:19

CHARACTERISTICS

“You fill your stomach up four or five times a day . . . and it gives you a feeling of comfort. It’s like having a pair of arms around you. But it’s . . . temporary. Then you’re disgusted at the bloatedness of your stomach and . . . you bring it [the food] all up again . . . .”\(^10\) Diana’s own words portray the cycle of anguish in which victims of anorexia and bulimia are trapped.

Ps 25:17

A. The Hunger for Love

Eating disorders are merely symptoms of the surfacing problems, but are not the underlying, actual problem.\(^11\)

Those with eating disorders experience . . .

- **Confusion** over values. What is most important . . .
  — Brains or beauty?
  — Intelligence or thinness?
  — Achievement or appearance?
- **Deception** of self and others
  — Stealing food or laxatives.
  — Cutting food into tiny bites, secret rituals with food.
  — Lying about eating, pretending to swallow food but spitting it out later.
- Depression over feeling “fat” when you weigh what is appropriate for your height or even when you “look like skin and bones”
  — Processing information becomes utterly painful.
  — Logical thinking becomes virtually impossible.
  — Life becomes an unconscious—or conscious and deliberate—attempt at suicide.
- Compulsion for some area of control
  — “Eating is the one part of my life I can control.”
  — “I can eat as much as I want and still not gain weight.”
Loneliness from the desire to avoid discovery
— “I’m a Christian, but I can’t talk to anyone about this problem.”
— “I feel claustrophobic if people get too close to me.”
— “I long for closeness, yet I’m scared of it.”

Low self-worth because personal value is based on appearance
— “I’m a fat pig.”
— “I don’t deserve any help! I am a bad person.”
— “I don’t deserve to live.”

People pleasing with an excessive desire for approval
— “If only I had done better, my parents would not have divorced.”
— “If I had just been better, I would not have been abandoned.”
— “If I had just weighed less, I might have been loved.”

Perfectionism from the belief that everything must fit just right or it’s horrible
— “I must have the perfect body like the models in the magazines.”
— “I must make perfect grades, or I’ll be depressed for months.”
— “I must perform perfectly, or no one will love me.”

*Gal 1:10*

**Physical Clues**

Don’t be deceived. Not all anorexics or bulimics will appear greatly underweight. That is why it is important that you be alert to other warning signs of an eating disorder. Don’t be misled about the danger of these disorders—both can be deadly.

- **Blood cell abnormalities**
  — Anemia and a low count of white blood cells cause a deficiency in the immune system.

- **Bone problems**
  — Deficiency in calcium causes bone deterioration, fractures and osteoporosis.

- **Bowel dysfunction**
  — Excessive use of laxatives causes bowels to become totally dependent and unable to function without laxatives. Long-term stomach problems can result.

- **Dental problems**
  — Purging of food brings up hydrochloric acid from the stomach that washes across the teeth. Gastric juices cause erosion of tooth enamel, cavities, pain, discoloration and tooth loss.

- **Digestive problems**
  — Forced vomiting causes bleeding esophagus, bloated stomach, stomach cramps, chronic constipation and other digestive complications.
• **Glandular problems**
  — Thyroid irregularities cause decreased energy, decreased reflexes and lethargy.
  — Water imbalance and retention cause chronic swelling of feet, hands and glands.
  — Other signs of glands not functioning properly are low body temperature, dry skin and brittle nails.

• **Hair loss**
  — Poor nutrition and inadequate protein cause thinning of hair, giving a balding appearance. When the hair falls out, a white fuzz appears in its place.

• **Heart problems**
  — Malnutrition causes an imbalance of the heart’s essential minerals (calcium, phosphorous, magnesium, chloride, sodium and potassium), which in turn causes irregular heartbeats (arrhythmia) . . . possibly death. These cardiovascular complications produce a mortality rate of 5.15 percent among bulimics as a result of cardiac arrest.

• **Hypoglycemia**
  — Low blood sugar causes fatigue, anxiety, dizziness and headaches.

• **Kidney failure**
  — Chronic dehydration causes kidney failure.

• **Menstrual problems**
  — Deficiency in fat (an essential component in good health) causes menstrual cycles to stop for two or three months at a time. When fat levels drop below 22 percent of normal weight, menstruation ceases. Amenorrhea is the abnormal absence of menstrual cycles. Bulimics have irregular cycles, while with anorexics the cycles completely stop.

• **Mental difficulties**
  — Malnutrition (deficiency in vitamins, minerals, proteins and fats) causes slow thinking, extreme forgetfulness and seizures. Neurotransmitters in the brain are altered, affecting judgment.

• **Musculoskeletal problems**
  — Deficiency in potassium causes muscle spasms, pain, atrophy and premature aging.

• **Vision problems**
  — Deficiency in vitamin A causes deterioration of eyesight.

• **Weight swings or drops**
  — This is the most ominous sign of all. The bingeing or purging of the bulimic causes extreme weight fluctuation within short periods of time. The self-starvation of the anorexic causes the body weight to get so low that kidneys and other organs start to shut down, leading to death.

> *Ps 31:10*

**Note:** If you are experiencing any of these physical or emotional problems, be sure to consult your health care professional.
People gaze at royalty through rose colored glasses. Yet, the Princess of Wales was a princess in pain. She felt helpless over her husband’s adultery and inadequate around the royal family. “Anything good I ever did, nobody ever said a thing, never said, ‘Well done,’” she shared. “But if I tripped up, which invariably I did because I was new at the game, a ton of bricks came down on me.” By her own admission, the rejection and loneliness led her into an illicit affair. This sense of low self-worth was the setup for an eating disorder.

A. Surface Environmental Causes

Ps 27:10

- **Feeling worthless** because of abuse in the home
  - verbal assaults or emotional starvation
  - physical or sexual abuse
  - alcoholism or drug abuse
- **Feeling inadequate** because of unrealistic expectations of others
  - perfectionistic parents
  - acceptance based on performance
  - conditional love
- **Feeling driven** in a high performance atmosphere
  - models and ballerinas (Sixty percent have eating disorders.)
  - dancers, actors, actresses
  - athletes, particularly wrestlers and gymnasts
- **Feeling hopeless** as a result of depression after an abortion
  - denial of reality
  - deep sadness with no apparent explanation
  - guilt over taking an innocent life
- **Feeling powerless** because of obesity in family
  - one or both parents
  - a propensity for gaining weight
  - fear of being fat

Why do you have an eating disorder? . . . Are you puzzled?

Puzzles are solved by carefully putting the pieces together to reveal a true picture. When you put the emotional clues together, the picture emerges of a person in pain . . . a love-starved person caught in a life threatening cycle. Learning the truth and living in the truth about the Lord’s unfailing love for you are the
major pieces needed to begin solving the problem . . . to begin the healing process of becoming whole.

Isa 54:10

B. Checklist for Anorexia or Bulimia

— I hate how I look.
— I hate how I feel.
— I feel powerless.
— If I could control how I look, I would be happy.
— I obsessively weigh myself more than once a day.
— I obsessively think about food.
— I eat when I’m not hungry.
— I hide how much I eat.
— I hide how much I vomit.
— I hide how much I exercise.
— I hide how much I take laxatives and/or diuretics.
— I hide my true feelings.
— I avoid conflict at all costs.
— I avoid being around people because I feel fat.
— I have a hard time eating when other people are present.
— I have a hard time asking for help.
— I avoid letting people really know me.
— I feel a lot of guilt over my past.
— I feel a sense of shame about who I am.
— I feel a sense of low self-worth.
— I feel good because I’m a perfectionist.
— I wish I could just disappear.
— I wish I could stop my pain.

C. Root Cause

An eating disorder is a consequence of your attempt to get your inner hunger for unconditional love and acceptance met by having a “perfect body.”

• Both the anorexic and the bulimic have an obsessive focus on being thin.

The bulimic does not love food any more than the anorexic loves to starve. In fact, the bulimic comes to hate the food just as much as the anorexic does. The bulimic uses food as a means to numb feelings and as a tool to lose weight. It provides something to purge, thereby eliminating calories and leading to weight loss.

Wrong Belief:
“I’m so fat no one could love me. I hate who I am. The only way I can be loved is to be in control of my body and get it to the right size.”

Prov 14:12

Right Belief:

The issue in life is not my size, but to see myself through God’s eyes. The Lord loves me just as I am. Instead of being consumed by control, I’m choosing to release control of my life and trust the Lord Jesus with every part of my heart.

Prov 3:5-6

STEPS TO SOLUTION

One of the keys to eventual recovery from anorexia or bulimia is touch. Touch is a nonverbal, meaningful way of communicating love that brings validation and acceptance. Diana said that human contact made her feel stronger. She was continually reaching out to the defenseless . . . to children . . . to the sick . . . to the terminally ill. Just as Diana needed to reach out to others, she desperately needed others to reach out to her. Some who are starved for affection might, at the same time, reject affection as a means of self-protection. Likewise, those who are desperate for love may reject the love, but nevertheless they still have an abiding need for love. Every person who is starved for love needs to truly know and accept the love of the Lord in order to meet this deepest inner need for love. Our God of love says,

Jer 31:3

A. Key Verse to Memorize

Rom 12:12

B. Key Passages to Read and Reread

Do you struggle with how your body looks? Acceptance of your God-given body is essential to achieve victory over anorexia and bulimia. Even though you may have difficulty accepting your appearance, know that God sees you and loves you as His precious creation. You are absolutely perfect in His eyes.

The more you realize that God is with you from the moment you are conceived until your final breath, the more you will be able to value both your body and your life. Do you know that God designed you as a one-of-a-kind creation? Do you know that God considers you as so special that He has a personalized plan for your life? Do you realize He knit your body together while you were still inside your mother’s womb? Just realizing the thoroughness of God’s knowledge of you (He calls you wonderful.) and knowing that His thoughts are always with you will give you comfort . . . for you are always on His mind. Read Ps 139 and read out loud the truths from these verses. Then you will begin to see how precious you are to God.

Ps 139

- God knows me

Ps 139:1

- God knows my sitting and rising
Ps 139:2
- God **knows** my thoughts

Ps 139:2
- God **knows** my going out

Ps 139:3
- God **knows** my lying down

Ps 139:3
- God **knows** my every way

Ps 139:3
- God **knows** my words before I speak

Ps 139:4
- God **hems** me in. (He protects me.)

Ps 139:5
- God’s **presence** is behind me and before me

Ps 139:5
- God’s **hand** is upon me

Ps 139:5
- God’s **presence** is around me

Ps 139:5-6
- God’s **Spirit** is everywhere with me

Ps 139:7
- God **cannot** be escaped

Ps 139:7
- God **is** in the heavens

Ps 139:8
- God **is** in the depths

Ps 139:8
- God **is** on the wings of the dawn
Ps 139:9

- God is on the far side of the sea.

Ps 139:9

- God will guide me where I go

Ps 139:10

- God will hold me tightly

Ps 139:10

- God sees me as clearly in the dark as in bright sunlight

Ps 139:11-12

- God created me

Ps 139:13

- God knit me together in my mother’s womb

Ps 139:13

- God made me in an awesome way

Ps 139:14

- God created me in a way that causes wonder

Ps 139:14

- God saw my frame when I was hidden in my mother’s womb

Ps 139:15

- God saw my unformed body

Ps 139:16

- God ordained all my days and recorded them in His book

Ps 139:16

- God thinks of me

Ps 139:17

- God’s thoughts about me are precious

Ps 139:17

- God’s thoughts about me are vast in number
Ps 139:17

- God’s thoughts about me outnumber the grains of sand

Ps 139:18

- God searches and tests me

Ps 139:23

- God searches and knows my heart

Ps 139:23

- God tests me and knows my anxious thoughts

Ps 139:23

- God sees and leads me

Ps 139:24

- God sees every offensive way in me

Ps 139:24

- God will lead me to experience everlasting life

Ps 139:24

“You just need to eat more” is the over simplistic assumption that many people have toward those starving themselves. While eating more appears to be the obvious need, consuming more is not the major need. In order to restore healthy eating patterns, you must address the hidden problems, apply the following steps, and allow the Lord to meet your deepest inner needs.

Phil 4:19

C. Accept God’s Gift of Life

A New Beginning

God’s ways are mysterious. Sometimes He allows us to suffer the consequences of our own human “wisdom” so that He can teach us His true wisdom.

If you have never entered into a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, the greatest lesson you can ever learn is that Jesus Christ died to pay the penalty for your sins, and He offers you forgiveness for all your sins along with a fresh, new beginning. If you surrender your will and give control of your life to Jesus, He will come into your heart and make you whole. He Himself will take up residence in your life, giving you His power to be and to do what is best for you. It’s not that you will avoid all the storms of life, but He promises to be with you in the midst of the storm.

Does a new beginning sound too good to be true? Well, it’s not! Would you like to enter into a loving relationship with Jesus right now by trusting Him as your Savior? Why not invite Jesus Christ into your life and receive His full forgiveness? The following prayer will help you.
"Dear God, I need You in my life. I’m empty inside, and I need You to make me whole. Many times I’ve chosen to do what I knew was wrong. Jesus, thank You for loving me enough to die on the cross for my sins. Please forgive me for my sins. I’m asking You to come into my life to be my Lord and Savior. I give You complete control of my life. Change me inside and out. Give me a desire to do what is right, and make me the kind of person that You want me to be. Thank You for Your mercy, grace and forgiveness and for Your gift of eternal life.

In Your precious name I pray. Amen.”

D. Acknowledging Your Need

- **Agree** to get a thorough medical checkup. This condition is life threatening!
  
  *Prov 27:12*

- **Attend** weekly (or regular) sessions with a knowledgeable, professional counselor.
  
  *Prov 23:12*

- **Acquire** as much knowledge about eating disorders as possible—for yourself and for those close to you.
  
  *Prov 24:14*

- **Admit** your inability to control the eating pattern.
  
  *James 5:16*

- **Abandon** the idea that you just need more willpower. This is not a diet problem.
  
  *2 Cor 10:4-5 (Also read 2 Cor 12:9-10.)*

- **Allow** yourself to forgive those who have hurt you . . . and even to forgive yourself.
  
  *Col 3:13*

- **Act** in total faith on God’s power to rescue you.
  
  *Ps 71:1-3*

E. Know Your True Identity

- Know that if you have come into a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus, your **true** identity is in Christ **Himself**.

  You are a new creation in Christ. You are no longer what you were. If you allow Jesus to become the focus of your life—not food, not compulsion, but Christ—you will increasingly find freedom.

  *2 Cor 5:17*

- Know that the **old “you” died.**
When you trusted in Christ and in Him alone as your Savior, the old you died, and He gave you a new nature, a new life, a new identity—in Him. Your thinking and behavior patterns may still be compulsive about craving food and obsessive about thinness. Those patterns, however, no longer need to control you because Christ has broken the power of your sin. As you learn to renew your mind with His truth, He will continue to break those compulsive patterns, and He will set you free.

*Gal 2:20*

- Know that even in the midst of your trials, you are totally **accepted by the Father**.

Regardless of how you’ve been treated by significant family members and friends, you are given unconditional love and unconditional acceptance from your heavenly Father. He loves you just the way you are, but **because** He loves you, He **will change you**. He will take your hand, like the hand of a little child, and will walk you into freedom.

*Isa 41:10*

- Know that the Spirit of Christ will produce **His control in you**.

It’s not your self-control; it’s yielding to the Spirit’s **control** in you. When you are rooted in Christ, He will naturally produce the fruit of self-control.

*Gal 5:22-23*

- Know that your freedom **comes through Christ**.

Family and friends will be used by God—but total freedom from bondage comes only **through Christ**.

*Rom 8:2*

**What Is the Truth about You?**

- The **world** tells you a lie—“You’ve got to be thin to be accepted.”
- The **flesh** tells you to live a lie—“You need to do it your own way.”
- Satan, the father of lies, tells you that you will not die (Gen 3:4).

**BUT . . .**

*Jesus, who is the Truth, tells you—“The truth will set you free” (John 8:32).*

*Jesus comes to bear your burden and to make your heart light. Believe Him, rely on Him, trust Him to walk with you to freedom. Hold fast to Him, and you will find rest for your soul.*

*Matt 11:28-29*
Do . . . Learn everything you can.

Knowledge is your friend while ignorance is your enemy. Find the best material you can at the library, on the Internet or from competent professionals.

*Prov 19:20*

Do . . . Confront in a loving way.

Confrontation is not easy! But doing nothing is the opposite of truly loving someone.

*Prov 12:18*

Do . . . Seek professional help for the one in need.

A mark of wisdom is acknowledging your need for help. Locating a specialist in eating disorders may require asking a pastor, a physician or a school counselor for help.

*Prov 15:22*

Do . . . Talk about emotions, striving to reach deeper levels of communication.

As part of your dialogue, ask, “Why do you feel that way?” Seek to uncover the underlying causes behind this crisis.

*Prov 20:5*

Do . . . Listen, listen, listen with your heart.

The best conversationalist is someone who knows how to listen. People love to hear their words repeated: “So what you are saying is . . . .” Listening and repeating what is said helps build trust and opens up communication, which in turn leads to healing.

*Eccl 3:7*

Do . . . Verbalize your genuine, heartfelt love by using tender, endearing terms.

Positive reinforcement is a desperate need. Tender terms such as *precious* or *dear* or saying their name in a tender way will often help someone to feel nurtured. (Avoid sounding contrived.) A pet name can be especially endearing to both men and women.

*Prov 25:11*

Do . . . Express love with physical affection.

Looking someone in the eyes, reaching out to touch a hand or a gentle touch on the shoulder can be helpful. In certain relationships, such as those of parents, siblings and spouses, hugging, holding and kissing can be especially meaningful.

*Prov 17:17*

Do . . . Be honest about the dangers.

The debilitating effects of eating disorders wreak havoc on the body. Those in need of help need to learn to think long-term, not short-term, about the very real dangers of eating disorders.
1 Thess 5:14

Do . . . Stay with your loved one and enlist other nurturing people to be present, if necessary, around the clock.

Frequently, being present with them means paying the high cost of commitment. But salvaging a life is worth the cost.

Prov 18:24

Do . . . Pray faithfully.

Let your loved one know that you are specifically praying for them by name. Pray with them for courage to overcome and to heal.

James 5:16

Don’t be forceful or controlling.

One mother succeeded in getting her daughter to eat by distracting her from negative thoughts with constant praise and unconditional love during all her waking moments.

Prov 12:18

Don’t be unrealistic about your expectations for change.

It has taken nearly a lifetime of negative thinking to reach this point. It will take many months or longer for full healing to take place.

Prov 19:11

Don’t naively assume that all well-meaning doctors who treat anorexics and bulimics are equally capable.

Find a competent, compassionate specialist who ministers to the inner needs of patients and with whom the patient can develop a deep bond of trust. If necessary, seek a second or third opinion.

Prov 15:22

Don’t let anorexics see the numbers on the scale when being weighed.

Tell them you will relieve them of the responsibility of knowing their weight. Whatever the number, their negative thinking tells them it’s too high. If they don’t have a number to fight, that’s one less negative they have to contend with.

Prov 16:21

Don’t fail to request help from a former anorexic.

Former anorexics know all the tricks, such as poisoning their food, exercising under the sheets and slipping food up their sleeves to discard later. Nothing is more reassuring to someone with an eating disorder than a helping hand from someone who’s been there—someone now living in victory.

Prov 27:17

Don’t assume that you are helpless if anorexics won’t eat. Offer to hand feed.

Because anorexics possess a negative mindset that tells them not to eat, hand feeding can relieve their self-imposed pressure of guilt and fear of overeating.
Don’t give up.

Patience, persistence and perseverance are essential to help restore your loved one to wholeness.

1 Cor 13:4-8

People with eating disorders are love-starved. Express your love by keeping eye contact with them and spending time with them . . . much time. This is how they spell love: T-I-M-E. Those with eating disorders don’t feel valuable. You will show that they do have value if you tangibly reach out and touch them. Even if they don’t seem to respond, they desperately seek your acceptance. They desperately long for unconditional love, the Lord’s love . . . your love.

NOTES


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