

# Biblical help for those who struggle with Eating Disorders

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## Introduction:<sup>1</sup>

- Kim is 22, having graduated with honors from a prestigious university. Very thin, attractive and well-groomed, she insists that everything which she does be perfect. She describes herself as "very disciplined, a strong person who sometimes has trouble being compassionate." Popular with her peers, she admits that she really doesn't like herself, and fears she is becoming fat. "Most of the time I can handle it, but then I seem to lose it, and my world falls apart, so I vomit, and then I feel horrible, so I exercise like crazy and fast. Then I may be OK for a while... but it starts all over again. It's a horrible way to live, but I really think that I am OK, and I can handle it."
- Suzie is 19, a sophomore at a local technical college. She is gifted intellectually but had to drop out of the nursing major due to failing grades. "I just couldn't discipline myself to study," she admits. "And I'm not doing much better this year either." Once or twice a week she secretly gorges great amounts of food, and then forces herself to vomit—a habit that began her senior year of high school. "I know it sounds sick—but I just can't seem to get over it, and it's not a big deal. I may be a little overweight but at least I'm not obese."
- Ben is 45, single, a homeowner with a stable job. He has given up on his dream of finding a wife. "I realize I am overweight, but I'll never get married now, so who cares?" Most days he stays late at the office, pouring himself into his work. Weekends are when he really struggles—especially at night. "Friday and Saturday night are the worst—I just lose control. I watch TV alone and fly through one bag of junk food after another. It's been this way for at least a year or two. Even when I do go to church on Sunday I feel like such a loser—I would be ashamed if people knew what I was really like."

NOTE: according to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.)*, Kim qualifies for the diagnosis of Anorexia Nervosa and Suzie qualifies for the diagnosis of Bulimia Nervosa. Ben qualifies for the more recent diagnosis of Binge Eating Disorder—not found in previous editions of the DSM.

## A. DSM-5 diagnoses: 3 Eating Disorders<sup>2</sup>

### 1. Anorexia Nervosa (DSM-5, pp.338-39)

- a. Restriction of energy intake relative to requirements, leading to a significantly low body weight

<sup>1</sup> Fictitious case studies based on composites of counseling cases as well as typical characteristics as described in various sources.

<sup>2</sup> *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

- b. Intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat, or persistent behavior that interferes with weight gain, even though at a significantly low weight
- 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 persistent lack of recognition of seriousness of the current low body weight
- d. Specify if restricting type, or binge-eating/purging type

2. **Bulimia Nervosa** (DSM-5, p.345)

- a. Recurrent episodes of binge eating
  - Eating in a discreet period of time (e.g., within any 2-hour period) any amount of food that is definitely larger than what most individuals would eat
  - A sense of lack of control—overeating during the episode
- b. Recurrent inappropriate compensatory behaviors in order to prevent weight gain (self-induced vomiting, misuse of laxatives or diuretics, fasting, excessive exercise, etc.)
- c. Binge eating / compensatory behaviors occur on average at least 1/week for 3 months
- d. Self-evaluation unduly influenced by body shape and weight

3. **Binge-Eating Disorder** (DSM-5, p.350)

- a. Recurrent episodes of binge eating (see Bulimia)
- b. The binge eating episodes are associated with three (or more) of the following
  - Eating much more rapidly than normal
  - Eating until feeling uncomfortably full
  - Eating large amounts of food when not feeling physically hungry
  - Eating alone because of feeling embarrassed by how much one is eating
  - Feeling disgusted with oneself, depressed, or very guilt afterwards
- c. Marked distress regarding binge eating
- d. Binge eating occurs, on average, at least once a week for 3 months

## B. Do labels matter? Implications of using DSM terminology:

- 1. Belief in the medical model
  - a. Illustration: one may "have" an ear infection, caused by a bacterium or virus in the middle ear, diagnosed with the help of a pneumatic otoscope, and treated (at times) with antibiotics (mayoclinic.org)
  - b. Implication: people may "have" an eating disorder...

2. Failure to identify the foundational heart issues (the root) that lead to the disordered patterns of eating (the fruit)
    - a. Illustration: the symptoms (ear pain, diminished hearing, fever) are assumed to be caused by a medical condition (inner ear infection) and treated accordingly
    - b. Implication: the symptoms (pattern of disordered eating) are assumed to be caused by a medical / psychological condition and treated accordingly
  3. Lack of personal accountability
    - a. Illustration: we typically are not responsible for acquiring an ear infection; we certainly are not responsible for the symptoms of the infection
    - b. Implication: a person is not responsible for acquiring an eating disorder; he/she is certainly not responsible for the symptoms of the disorder
  4. Seeking a sudden cure
    - a. Illustration: most typically welcome the prescribed antibiotics which quickly cure the ear infection; we are open to further biological intervention such as the surgical insertion of ear tubes ("myringotomy")
    - b. Implication: the eating disordered person desires expert help which can quickly cure the disorder—whether biological, psychological, or even spiritual deliverance (all of which differ from the biblical view of progressive sanctification)
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Evaluate: would you agree with the recent quote below from *The Science of Addiction*, viewing drunkenness, overeating and adultery as addictions, i.e. diseases which some are powerless to resist? Why or why not?

*"Sometimes we learn from those lost battles, with the hangover [alcohol] or the numbers on the scale [food] or the heartbreak of a spouse [adultery] being enough to set us right. Sometimes, however, there is no lesson learned, or at least no lesson headed. Sometimes instead **we're powerless to not repeat the behavior...**The behavior becomes a habit, the habit becomes a compulsion, and the compulsion becomes the life-wrecking **disease** that is addiction."*

(Jeffrey Kluger, "The Disease of the Pleasures," *Time—Special Edition; The Science of Addiction* [January, 2020], p.4.)

## C. Potential Contributing Factors Related to Disordered Eating

(caution: correlations do not demonstrate causation)

1. Social pressure
  - a. Contemporary society is preoccupied with thinness

- b. Perceived worth is often tied to sexual attractiveness—especially for females
  - c. Many stress that character is relatively unimportant—"perception is reality"
  - d. The above explains why anorexic and bulimic behaviors typically affect females in the Western hemisphere in the 20th / 21st centuries
2. Sexual conflict
- a. Many report fears / guilt over sexual development and behavior
  - b. Some report seeking to avoid dating conflict via intentionally becoming unattractive to males via maintaining a boyish figure
3. Family conflict
- a. Families are typically middle or upper middle class
  - b. Family members frequently struggle with obesity, obsessive dieting, etc.
  - c. Families often emphasize the importance of externals (e.g., physical appearance)
  - d. Failure to openly and honestly communicate: mothers often self-centered and dominant; fathers often aloof and passive
4. Personal conflict
- a. Controlling
  - b. Perfectionistic
  - c. Immature / selfish
5. Cognitive conflict
- a. Juvenile absolutistic thinking
  - b. Views food choices / eating opportunities as good or evil

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*When we stop to consider it, we can quickly see that in a culture simultaneously marked by obesity and obsessed with thinness, we have an unhealthy relationship with food. Whether we overindulge or punitively avoid, few of us simply enjoy food as God intended. (<https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2015/12/30/gluttony-gospel-reflections-for-foodies-comfort-eaters/>)*

## D. Getting to the heart of the problem: heart motives related to disordered eating

1. Perfection (demanding perfection / excellence in every activity)

- a. God requires faithfulness, not perfection
 

“It is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful” (I Cor 4:2)
  - b. Clarification: believers are commanded to be morally “perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Mt 5:48). Does that apply to striving for excellence in hobbies (playing golf or gardening), chores (cleaning the kitchen or washing the car), school (earning a 4.0 GPA), work (being the top producer) or family (throwing a perfect birthday party or planning the ultimate vacation)?
2. Control (striving to control self, circumstances or others)
    - a. We don't have the right to seek to control ourselves
 

“What? Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's” (I Cor 6:19-20)
    - b. We don't need to seek to control our circumstances
 

“And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28)
    - c. We have been called to serve others—not to attempt to control them
 

“Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others” (Phil 2:4)

“And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (Mt 22:39)

“The Son of man came not be ministered unto [served], but to minister [serve], and to give his life a ransom for many’ (Mt 20:28)
  3. Popularity (longing to be accepted by others)
    - a. Living for the approval of others (the fear of man) is a trap / snare
 

“The fear of man bringeth a snare: but whoso putteth his trust in the Lord shall be safe.” (Proverbs 29:25)
    - b. Believers are already accepted—in union with Christ
 

“To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the Beloved” (Eph 1:6)

“If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies...” (Phil 2:1)
  4. Pleasure (longing for immediate temporary pleasure)
    - a. The temporary pleasure of sin can't compete with the true pleasure found in Christ
 

“By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the

pleasures of sin for a season; Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he had respect unto the recompense of the reward” (Heb 11:24-26)

"Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God." (Heb 12:2)

- b. True pleasure is not found in broken cisterns but in the Fountain of Living Waters!

"For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water." (Jer 2:13)

"Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth; but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion forever." (Ps 73:25-26)

5. Laziness (living for self rather than living in response to the gospel)

- a. Believers are to live Spirit-filled lives—characterized by godly self-control

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance [self-control]" (Gal 5:22-23)

- b. Believers are motivated by the gospel—the person and work of Christ

"And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again." (2 Cor 5:15).

6. Safety (fearing what would happen if I followed Christ / ate normally)

"Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God" (Is 41:10)

"I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. So that we may boldly say, The LORD is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me" (Heb 13:6)

7. Self-atonement (seeking forgiveness via penance rather than Christ)

- a. There is nothing we can do to "earn" forgiveness—either through denying ourselves pleasures (I will eat less) or performing religious exercises (I will read my Bible more)

"And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith" (Phil 3:9)

- b. The only righteousness we have is the imputed righteousness of Christ

"For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him." (II Cor 5:21)

## E. Helps in helping those who struggle with disordered eating

1. Define the main goal

- a. The goal is not to help people focus on self and gain / maintain / lose weight—that is the problem

“Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?...But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Mt 6:31,33)

- b. The goal is to make disciples of Christ who long to know Him

“I have esteemed the words of his mouth more than my necessary food” (Job 23:12)

- 2. Communicate a biblical world view—which values the eternal / internal more than the temporal / external

“But we have this treasure in earthen vessels” (II Cor 4:7)

“Though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal” (II Cor 4:16-18)

- 3. Help people practically treasure what God treasures: the inward beauty of one who fears the Lord and pursues godliness

“Favor [charm] is deceitful, and beauty is vain: but a woman that feareth the LORD, she shall be praised” (Prov 31:30).

“Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel; but let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price” (I Pet 3:2-4)

- 4. Help people to lose / maintain / gain weight—but only for the right reason

- a. The temporary pleasure of sin can't compete with the true pleasure found in Christ

“By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he had respect unto the recompense of the reward” (Heb 11:24-26)

- b. True pleasure is not found in broken cisterns but in the Fountain of Living Waters!

“For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.” Jer 2:13)

“Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth; but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion forever” (Ps 73:25-26)

- 5. Assist believers in developing a biblical theology of food, eating and abstaining

- a. Food was given not only for nourishment, but enjoyment

“Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not high-minded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy” (1 Tim 6:17)

- b. Ascetic abstinence is NOT a mark of spiritual strength

“In the latter times some shall depart from the faith ... forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats [foods], which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth. For every creature [creation] of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving: For it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer” (1 Tim 4:1-5).

"These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence." (Col 2:25)

- 6. Continue to help others with the struggles all believers face—including struggles with disordered eating—by rejoicing in the gospel and encouraging one another in our progressive sanctification through the means of grace by the work of the Holy Spirit
- 7. Encourage consultation with
  - a. Physicians who can address the physical challenges that result from disordered eating
  - b. Nutritionists who can recommend a healthy diet

## F. Concluding Notes:

- 1. Those who struggle with disordered eating are no different than the rest of us. They face the challenges of living in a broken world where sinful people sin against one another and often respond in sinful ways. Like us they need a personal, active, satisfying and transforming relationship with the Bread of Life—the Lord Jesus Christ.
- 2. Much of the descriptive information in this handout is based on the Abnormal Psychology textbooks the author has read through the many years he has taught this undergraduate university course. The biblical world view and counseling ideas are based on the biblical counseling books, journal articles and blog posts the author has read through the years—as well as the biblical counseling seminars and podcasts he has listened to. None of the information in this handout is presented as original.