

Many people grasp a better understanding of eating disorders by assuming that they are similar to alcohol and drug addictions; therefore, they conclude that a 12-step approach is the most effective way to treat such disorders, including anorexia and bulimia. These complex illnesses, however, do not fit so neatly into the little boxes constructed by the addictionology field. Throughout the 12 steps and the accompanying literature, numerous themes and concepts can be quite applicable to eating disorders: e.g. embracing the idea that a Higher Power can bring about restoration; as well as replacing the addiction with improved relations with God, self, and others.

A stumbling block inherent in the Addictions Model, i.e. the 12-step approach, is the idea that one will always be sick, and sufferers will forever be fighting those constant battles and voices. This never-ending process of “recovering” revolves around following strict rules to avoid acting on those self-destructive urges.

With the Full Recovery Model, clinicians operate from the standpoint that when the original functions of the eating disorder are understood and processed, when the eating disorder itself is replaced with meaningful relationships and passionate pursuits, when the effective coping skills fill in the earlier deficits...the eating disorder is no longer needed. A vivid picture of recovery can be found in 2 Corinthians 5:17: “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation: old things are passed away; behold, all things have become new.”

Perhaps more to the point is that people with eating disorders have to eat. Chemically-dependent sufferers can learn to live without their drug of choice. A relationship with food—a substance both loved and hated—is so complicated, but it is a must.

Most important to my view of the recovery process is the reality that the eating disorder itself can become deeply entrenched as someone’s identity. And people will cling to it mightily, even if it is as “recovered” or “recovering” anorexic or bulimic. In my opinion, the ability to say, “I used to suffer from an eating disorder, but I am free today” is indicative of someone who is choosing to close that chapter of his or her life.

Are eating disorders similar to alcohol and drug addictions? Indeed, in many ways. Continually evolving beyond cookie-cutter approaches to treatment—of anything—is wise practice.