

Eating Disorders....from a mother's perspective: Susan Landry, LPC

It's February again, the month in which I bring attention to National Eating Disorders Awareness and Prevention Month. This year, I want to approach this disease from a different angle: from a parent's perspective.

"The main feeling you experience when your daughter has an eating disorder is FEAR," explains one mother. "You are confused, and terrified, and you feel utterly helpless."

Self-starvation, extreme weight loss, binge eating and then vomiting, preoccupation with food and weight--these are some of the symptoms of the serious eating disorders anorexia and bulimia. Family members can become overwhelmed as they watch their loved one battle this illness.

"It seemed that anything we said or did in an effort to help was the wrong thing. Even though she was in and out of therapy, she just got worse." Eating disorders are complex physical and psychological disorders, typically affecting adolescents and young women. "It is impossible for other people to understand," says this mom. "Friends and other relatives would ask why we couldn't just make her eat. You feel a lot of guilt." The anorexic or bulimic individual relies on her symptoms to give her a sense of control and self-esteem. It becomes an obsession that takes over her thoughts and feelings...and spins out of control. "It's almost as if a demon takes over your child."

This mother explains that eventually things turned around. "I think that her relationship with her therapist was the most important thing. She also needed to be hospitalized at one point, and I would advise parents not to be afraid of that. It saved her life. Even when she wanted to get better, it was still extremely difficult. Like most sufferers, she was a high-achiever, and we would think: 'She's so intelligent; she should be able to get over this.' There's more to it than that. It's an ongoing battle, and it takes a long time."

Eating disorders develop out of a combination of many different factors, such as genetics, family dynamics, social pressures, uncontrollable circumstances. Some parents mistakenly view their daughter's eating disorder as something shameful, as a poor reflection on their family. "What I needed most was just someone to listen to me."

Besides fear, confusion, guilt, and helplessness, at times parents feel anger. "You have to understand that your child is not necessarily being defiant and rebellious; she's dealing with something very frightening."

Medical and psychological interventions, along with a great deal of prayer, persistence, and patience brought an end to this nightmarish struggle. "Today my daughter is happy and healthy and continuing the process of recovery."
"Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer." Romans 12:12