

God's Mirror

My Journey through the Vice of an Eating Disorder and How I learned Who I am in Christ

I felt as if the imprint of my butt was ingrained in the navy blue couch at my therapist's office. I knew every decoration; the smell of the office was all too familiar and I could probably drive there in my sleep. For the last couple of months I had sat on that blue couch receiving therapy twice a week. Although it was a warm Summer day I was still so cold, and I was trying so hard to stop shaking. What had she just said? My brain isn't working today, and apparently neither is my body. She gives me that look, like she's about to ask me that dreaded question. "How much have you eaten and drunk today?" A shiver goes up my spine, and I can't hide my shaking anymore. It's 1:30 pm. I could lie, I think to myself but I tell her the truth, "nothing." Up she gets from her chair, around the corner to fill the dreaded glass of water. She places it in my shaking hands, and tells me that in the next half hour I am to drink that glass of water. My stomach lurches, and feelings of frustration well up inside. "Who is she to tell me what to do?" I think to myself. Her next threat makes me lift that glass to my lips. "If you can't down it, you are going to the ER for an IV." 1:55 rolls around and there is half a glass of water, I wasn't going to drink it, and I couldn't. Next came a phone call, a drive to my doctor's and I was heading to the ER. What was this, the 5th time being poked with an IV? My heart rate was slow, my coloring was pale, I was told my eyes were sunken, and I was very dehydrated. "What next?" I thought. I can't eat, I can't drink, and I don't want to. The very thought of food frustrates me and scares me. Feelings of guilt, panic and defiance seize me. I was slowly surrendering my life to an eating disorder. The most taunting thought was that the more I surrendered the more engulfed I became in its arms, and the deeper I became the more hopeless I was. This would be my life, and this eating disorder (ED) would be my best friend.

A new best friend, one I didn't ask for but I chose to befriend anyway. He was always there for me but never in the right way. He stood beside me as any friend would but would whisper ugly things, lies that I many times believed. He watched as I stumbled and fell countless times, he laughed and would push me down again. I wouldn't amount to anything unless I did what he said. I thought I could find security in his "love" for me and my life would be better if he was my friend. He told me that he would make me feel beautiful, that his way with me was best. I listened, I followed, and he gradually began to control my life. My thoughts and actions revolved around my friend; nothing else mattered but ED. ED is a friend and an enemy alike. How is he a friend, how is he an enemy? Here we enter the complex world of an eating disorder.

From my previous article I shared my struggle with depression and suicide. I would love to leave you there, but there is more of my journey I feel is important to share. I want to share with you a part of my healing journey that like depression is ever so complex, the journey through the vice of an eating disorder. Eating disorders have become so very common among our young people, and I myself struggled with it also. By God's grace he brought me down that path for a purpose; there is always a purpose to what our sovereign God plans for us, even when it's hard to understand. Being led down this path has made me realize that sharing my experiences in my struggles can not only help those struggling but help loved ones and friends understand. I want to emphasize that I am not an expert and I don't have all the right answers. I may not cover all of the insurmountable information on eating disorders but I seek to bring you what I know from my struggle and what I feel is important to help. I pray that through the sharing of myself I bring God all the praise and honor he is due.

ED (a.k.a. eating disorder)

The struggle with an eating disorder or ED is unique to every person. Each person's struggle started somewhere different. Although each is different there is always a root, a reason and a starting point. This is an important thing to remember when it comes to those struggling and those watching someone who is struggling. I know from experience that although the root may be different the mind and behavior are very much the same.

I like to compare ED to a jumbled up ball of wires with many different colors. There are many strands which represent each individual person. The length of each wire represents the time each individual person struggles—some may only for a short time, and some may struggle for life. Each wire has knots or kinks that represent the times of either trying to get loose or becoming more entangled. The wires are in a jumbled ball; from the outside there is no color order, or organization. This represents the confusion and chaos loved ones see looking in. Now let's step inside that ball. From inside there is still chaos but each wire knows its place, for there is precarious organization. Each wire has its own color, length, and path, but all together they are so much alike. The ball is in the hands of ED. There are loose wires that so easily wriggle loose only to be wrapped tighter by ED. A worn wire in a last ditch effort tries to reach for help and ED finds a way to control the wire and to stick it again into the dark recess. There are even wires that lose all their color; these are ED's favorite, and they are gray and lifeless. He has worn those wires away; he's wrapped them and knotted them, worn their beautiful colors to gray and finally worn them lifeless.

What are the facts of ED?

Before I take you further into the mind of one with an eating disorder I want to share a little with those who don't know the facts about eating disorders. This is important to know as it is the spiritual and emotional aspect.

An eating disorder is a very serious mental illness that can cause severe and permanent damage or even death to one who suffers. The three most common eating disorders are anorexia, bulimia and binge-eating disorder. You may not realize how common eating disorders actually are or how serious they can be, so to give you an idea, here are a few statistics. Up to 24 million people of all ages and genders suffer from an eating disorder in the U.S. Anorexia is the third most common chronic illness among teenagers. Over ½ of teenage girls and nearly 1/3 of teenage boys use unhealthy weight control behaviors such as skipping meals, fasting, smoking cigarettes, vomiting and taking laxatives. Eating disorders also have the highest mortality rate of any mental illness.

The two most common eating disorders among young people and especially young women are Anorexia and Bulimia. It is important to know about anorexia and bulimia and the signs and symptoms; this will help you recognize an eating disorder.

Someone who has anorexia usually has a twisted view of their physical appearance. Usually the mindset is that she thinks she is extremely overweight when she is very thin. One who has anorexia usually starves herself and over-exercises. She is deathly scared of gaining weight.

The physical symptoms one with anorexia may have are: continual weight loss, irregular periods, low body temperature (that is why one may complain of always being cold), pale complexion and dry skin, dry brittle hair that may even fall out, growth of facial and fine body hair, easy bruising, exhaustion and fatigue.

The emotional symptoms are: An extreme fear of weight gain, excessive need for control, distorted body image, dramatic mood swings.

The behavioral symptoms are: Wearing loose clothing, deception (hiding food in napkins or clothes), abuse of laxatives, diet pills or diuretics, obsession with calories and fat content of food, excessive exercise, making excuses not to eat (such as "I already ate" or "I have an upset stomach"). Other behaviors are: isolation or avoiding social events, consuming a lot of low- or non- calorie food (such as diet soda, gum or coffee) avoiding restaurants and eating in front of others, ritualistic behaviors at meals (such as eating food in a particular order, or cutting food into tiny pieces), discomfort with or avoiding being touched, defensiveness when questioned about weight, hyperactivity and depression.

One who has bulimia overeats and then tries to get rid of it by inducing vomiting. One who has bulimia may abuse laxatives and diuretics which are other ways of making the body get rid of food.

The physical symptoms of bulimia are bingeing and purging, a constant sore throat, broken blood vessels in eyes, dramatic weight fluctuation, digestive problems, swollen neck glands and puffy cheeks, scrape wounds on knuckles (caused by contact between knuckles and teeth when one makes themselves throw up), eroding of tooth enamel and increased cavities.

The emotional symptoms are self criticism and poor body image, poor impulse control (abusing drugs, alcohol, spending and promiscuity.)

The behavioral symptoms are that one who has bulimia expresses guilt after eating, avoids restaurants and eating in front of others, abuses laxatives, diet pills, ipecac, diuretics and/ or enemas, frequently going into the bathroom right after meals, showering after meals, hiding food throughout the house, alternating between eating large amounts of food and self-starvation.

The behaviors of an anorexic and bulimic have consequences. Bad choices always have consequences. Some of the long term results of an eating disorder can be osteoporosis, muscle deterioration, anemia, organ damage, acid reflux, and tears in the esophagus, chronic constipation, abnormal liver function, elevated cholesterol, decreased estrogen, infertility, abnormal blood pressure, heart attack, stroke, brain shrinkage and even death.

The deeper cause of ED

ED's are easy to explain when there are statistics and when doctors know the behaviors and symptoms. We can see that ED's are extremely serious and cannot be taken lightly. They are also very complex. Some may look at the behavior and simply say it is caused by vanity. Although vanity has its place it is not that simple; there is something so much deeper to be seen.

Explaining the thoughts and emotions of one with an eating disorder is almost impossible. It is literally like trying to unwrap that jumbled ball in ED's hand. No one outside that ball can truly figure it out. So that is why we need to step inside and look closer.

The root causes of ED are all different. The reasons are different but each individual did choose friendship with ED. This may be confusing and we would ask, why would someone choose to live this way?

The struggle begins where most of us can't go, inside the head. For most with an ED there is something in life that has led them to a place of need or want. They lack something that has made them turn to ED. For me it started with the feeling that I didn't have control in life and the only thing I thought I could control was what I put in my body. For others it may be the lack of attention and this is a way to get it. It also may not be lack at all but may source from low-self esteem, self-criticism and guilt. There may be an extreme fear of weight gain as a result of distorted body image and that can lead to an ED. Whatever the reason may be, the source begins with need and they find that ED gives them what they desperately need or want.

To go deeper into this I want to talk briefly about some of the reasons. The main reasons are: *control, guilt, self-criticism, self harm, low self-esteem, poor body image and attention*. ED's can be caused by other things than the ones I listed but I want to reiterate and explain these because they are the most common. I want you to notice as I explain, that although each reason may be different, every person who has an ED many times struggles with some if not all the reasons I listed above.

Control

Control is something each of us struggles to give to God. The Christians life isn't an easy one, and God didn't promise that it would be. God did promise that he has everything in his sovereign control and we are to trust in that promise. "Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness" (Isa. 41:10). As sinful creatures it's hard to trust and leave control to God. We too often want our own control over things especially when life seems difficult. As a child I dealt with emotional wounds and then struggled with depression. With each obstacle I had to face I became frustrated and I turned my face away from God. It didn't feel that God was in control; in fact it felt like things were constantly spinning out of control. In sin I didn't see what God had for me, and I sought a foothold. My foothold wasn't placed on the rock of Jesus Christ but I looked at myself and I thought my control would be better.

For many who struggle with ED they are dealing with wounds in life. Wounds, whether they be from someone wounding us or the wounds of past sins; if they are not dealt with correctly they will inevitably lead to struggles. Dealing with wounds can be an uphill battle, but when the trust is taken away from God and put in ourselves the battle seems out of control. In desperation to seek control some turn to ED and their own will to fight. They find control in themselves and what they feed or don't feed their bodies.

The act of controlling what goes in and out of one's body can be a way of dealing with what seems to be out of control but it also can be a way of taking control. It can be an act of rebellion. Control can be taken away by force, as in instances of abuse, or it can be taken away for one's safety, by authority. Either way one with ED seeks to take back the control that has been taken, and one way is by again controlling food.

Guilt, Self-Criticism, Self-Harm

Guilt, self-criticism and self-harm are all feelings and tactics the devil tries to use to take our focus away from God. We also know very well that we are sinful creatures and can do no good. "As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one" (Rom. 3:10). We live in a sinful world where our sinful natures and sin abound. With much guilt I hated myself, for things I had done, for the wounds in my life. I felt that because of my sin God hated me and I thought that I didn't deserve his love. I felt guilt for many things, and constantly thought that everything I did was wrong, I couldn't do the simplest thing right. I didn't care about myself. When I looked in the mirror I hated not only the inside but the outside. With all those things in mind I resolved that I didn't deserve food, happiness or even life. I began intentionally hurting myself. I not only starved myself but I didn't care what happened to me. I would drive reckless, exercise in hot weather; I even in my darkest times would scratch and cut myself. In my depression and struggles I really longed for death, and in my hatred of myself and my life I played with death.

We each know the struggle with sin, and also the wounds sin has on our lives. Many of us know the guilt we face in response to sins and what it is to carry wounds. Self-criticism and self-harm can be the way we wrongfully respond to sin and wounds—as a response to guilt for something they did in their past for a sin they feel is unforgivable. The feelings that the wound they experienced was somehow their fault, that God was and is punishing them. These can lead to shame and can lead to self-harm and criticism.

It is easy to see where self-criticism and self-harm come alongside and are a result of the guilt. The guilt experienced can feel as if God hates them and they begin to hate themselves. The guilt one feels validates their feelings of self-criticism and can even lead to self-harm. They harm themselves by self-starvation and some may struggle with other forms of self-harm such as cutting. The response to guilt is seen most in those with bulimia; one eats, but feels guilt for eating and tries to get rid of it by throwing up or making their body get rid of it.

Low Self-Esteem, Poor Body Image, Attention

During my struggle with ED, I, along with many others with ED, struggled with low self-esteem and poor body image and the want or need for attention along with. This is probably the most complex part of the ED because it doesn't make a lot of sense in the eyes of others. As with many, I dealt with low-self esteem and poor body image growing up. I dealt with a lot from the wounds I experienced as a pre-teen and I never felt good about myself. I never felt pretty in school and I gained weight during puberty and struggled with acne. I had that awkward stage pretty much all through junior high and I never felt like I outgrew it on into high school.

When I began dieting and restricting food I began to notice results that I liked. I not only felt and looked skinnier but others noticed too. I received many comments about how skinny I looked and I enjoyed those comments. I began to feel like I was accomplishing what I longed for, to be pretty. As I dropped pound after pound I began to crave the attention and concern others gave me, even when comments were about how sick I was looking. It started a vicious cycle and the attention actually fed into my eating disorder. I wanted to be skinnier and the skinniest. I sought fulfillment in achieving thinness. But with every pound I lost I still wasn't happy, I still hated the image in the mirror. So again the cycle went on.

Attention, low self-esteem and poor body image are the most common causes of an ED and affect most if not all with ED. If they don't cause they are an integral part. Low self-esteem and poor body image are many times the start. Many who struggle have grown up with or developed low self-esteem and poor body image. They may have gone through an awkward chubby stage, or just plainly never felt "as pretty". It's hard to understand why young girls struggle even with just poor body image and low self-esteem. I don't know the complete answer to that but I know that we live in a world that has a great influence on the young generation, especially on young girls.

In our day and age we have so many sources of entertainment, and influence. The internet, television, magazines, newspapers, and even our phones can tell us a whole host of things. These things are not in and of themselves bad but they can influence our lives drastically. One of the main influences the media can have on girls and young women has to do with self-image and worth. We can't even turn the TV on without being taunted by the world's image of beauty. Their image isn't of what's on the inside is what counts but it is about being as beautiful as the movie stars. Internet and magazines do a good job of influencing our young generations of what beauty looks like. The front covers of magazines and storefronts in the mall have scantily clothed models who scream "this is beauty, look like me!" There is nothing wrong with striving for beauty. God wants us to take care of our bodies by exercise and eating healthy, he says so in I Corinthians 6:19, 20: "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." We also need to realize the false advertising in front of us. We don't always realize that these models are air brushed and altered to look "perfect." It's so easy for a young woman to be influenced. It's hard to not want to look like them; they are what our culture defines as beauty, right?

The influences in our world can affect every person differently. As a young girl I know I looked at the models and movie stars and I thought they were beautiful. And as I struggled with an ED I did look at those women and wrongly compared them to myself. I made a choice and my choice should have been to not believe the lies the media throws at our minds. My point here is that the influence of media and entertainment may not be a cause of an ED but it definitely does not help. Our day and age seems to emphasize being thin and the obesity epidemic of our country is showcased on billboards and television. Although this isn't all bad it can become to one who has an ED an extremely scary thing. Being "fat" is bad, and instead of living a healthy lifestyle, they see those diet plans and weight loss shows and go to the extreme. They use their behaviors to be the opposite, and become underweight and deathly thin. The image of beauty is to be tall, thin, and flawless. Though the models in a magazine may be an airbrushed image they are the world's way of displaying what we all should look like. When obesity is an epidemic those models are an idol. They strive by their behaviors to imitate those models, when in reality they are imitating an altered image. Those with eating disorders pay very close attention to their weight and image and strive to be the thinnest, impossibly thin, deathly thin. They think then that they will have achieved perfection and beauty.

Attention within an ED can go many ways. One may develop an ED as a way to get attention or attention can feed an ED. When attention feeds an eating disorder, it many times comes midst a full blown ED. It may start as feeling good from the comments about weight and cycle into craving those comments. Many times the comments of how good someone looks turn into comments about how skinny and sick someone looks. And the person with ED craves that even more. The cycle is vicious, it may seem to start with vanity, but we can see that it is more complex than that. The aspect of attention is hard to understand because many times the attention one with an ED receives really is needed. This means that the ED is noticeable by physical and emotional appearance - they don't look healthy, and something needs to be done. I don't want to detract from the importance of this for parents and loved ones. Do not refrain from doing something because you're afraid it will "feed" the eating disorder. I just want to bring understanding to you about what is going through your child or loved one's mind.

We have gone through many facts and causes of an eating disorder, and it is definitely a complex mental disease. Standing on the other side of this disease, I compare ED to having an addiction as to alcohol or drugs. In all the causes we can clearly see many

things that point us to the same reasons many turn to alcohol or drugs. And having an ED can be just as dangerous as, if not more dangerous, because one needs food and health to live. An ED can be used to control or to numb pain; it is used to hurt oneself; it is used to make oneself feel better; it is even used to gain attention. Many may not see my point of view or want to see my point of view, but it's truth. There is a reason for these addictions; they are always laced with sin, and many choose to turn to addictive habits because they aren't handling it God's way.

We all as Christians struggle with our own battle with sin, though some not to this extent. It's easy for us to judge those who struggle to the point of sickness with addictions, but we must remember that God is the judge. We have the Christian duty to pray for those who struggle, not to judge. As someone who has held the hand of ED, I know I was judged and I was easy to judge others who looked like they had an ED. I hope that you also now realize that appearances don't just make up an ED. Just because someone may be skinny it doesn't make them automatically anorexic. Please be careful with your comments and judging. Again, give it up to God who alone knows that person's needs and struggles. *(to be continued)*