

Anorexia

By Gary R. Collins

Usually we don't think much about it until it hits our own families or the family of somebody we know. Cherry's family was well-known when they traveled the country performing together. The eldest of four beautiful and talented teenager sisters, Cherry determined to maintain her slim appearance so she started a diet that included rigorous fasting, strenuous exercise, and an obsession with food and fasting that almost led to her death. Later, in a best-selling book titled *Starved for Attention*, singer Pat Boone's daughter, Cherry Boone O'Neill, wrote about her battles with anorexia and the treatment that led to her recovery.

What Is Anorexia?

Anorexia is an eating disorder characterized by a preoccupation with food and physical appearance, fear of gaining weight, and a prolonged refusal to eat. The result is excessive weight loss often accompanied by chemical deficiencies, heart problems, and other physical reactions that lead to death in about 5% of the cases. The condition appears most often in adolescent girls from middle-class and affluent families. Occasionally it appears in young boys, but it is rare among poor people and unknown in underdeveloped nations.

Anorexia usually begins with frustration about being overweight and a decision to diet. The person may believe that one's value or self-worth largely depend on being thin or shapely. There is a fear of gaining weight and a conviction that one is fat, despite considerable evidence to the contrary. Concerns about weight and food become obsessions. Eating is severely restricted and often accompanied by vigorous exercise and compulsive adherence to weight loss programs. Sometimes, to avoid criticism from family members, they will eat normally (or even binge) and then privately use laxatives and self-induced vomiting to rid the system of food. Eventually the anorexic begin to appear thin and emaciated. Fatigue and insomnia are common. Irregularities appear in the menstrual cycle, there is insensitivity to temperature changes, and the person has increased feelings of unhappiness and depression.

Why Anorexia?

Anorexia is a complex psychological and physical disorder that can have a variety of causes. Many anorexics come from families that value physical fitness, social acceptance, affluence, and success. Parents may have high ideals for their children and often there is genuine concern about the anorexic's refusal to eat. The young women may feel inadequate and insecure, often with a strong desire to look attractive and to be successful. By not eating, they hope to look more attractive, to boost self-esteem, and to increase the likelihood of success. Instead, they often harm their bodies with compulsive behavior that they seem unable to stop. Because eating disorders are complex, with physiological implications, they are difficult to treat and rarely respond to the approaches of inexperienced counselors, concerned friends, or worried parents. Little is accomplished by urging the anorexic to eat, assuring her that there is no need to diet, or quoting Bible verses about gluttony and lack of self-control. Instead, competent medical treatment is crucial along with counseling that gets to the causes of the condition, including low self-esteem, guilt, anxiety, depression, perfectionistic attitudes, and issues of sexual identity.

Sometimes treatment ignores the distress that is faced by demoralized and discouraged family members. Often parents are frustrated because progress is slow or initial treatment seems ineffective. Families need support, encouragement, and practical guidance. The best treatment usually includes family counseling. This can teach effective ways of getting along, help family members learn how to interact with the anorexic during or after treatment, and guide in the reevaluation of harmful and unbiblical attitudes about success or self-worth. Evidence suggests that complete recovery occurs in 80-90% of the cases, especially if the whole family is involved and treatment begins early.

Does the Bible say anything about Anorexia?

You won't find anorexia mentioned in the Bible passage, but anorexics and their families often have attitudes that are inconsistent with biblical teaching. Self-indulgence, greed, selfish

ambition, and gluttony are all condemned in Scripture (Matt. 23:25; James 3:13; Prov. 23:1-3), but sometimes these become part of our modern lifestyles and family values. The Bible gives no support to the idea that we are valued because of physical appearance. God loves us, even with our sin and imperfections (Romans 5:8).

Anorexics and their families may know this, but deep-seated attitudes and behavior are difficult and sometimes impossible to change without help. Along with treatment by competent professionals, the support of concerned friends and church members become crucial in helping individuals and families with eating disorders. And if somebody in your family gives evidence of an eating disorder, it is very important to get help. This may be a life or death decision.

This article was written by Gary R. Collins and produced by American Association of Christian Counselors.

Provided by Crossroads Counseling Center. Counseling From A Christian Perspective (803) 808-1800. SolutionsForLife.org