

Helping Those with Eating Disorders

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My name is Marleen Williams, and I am here to speak today about helping those with eating disorders. I would like to share with you a case study—it is not a real person, but it represents the struggles that I see when people come for help with an eating disorder.

Lucy was a wonderful daughter and her parents were very proud of her. She was well-behaved and obedient. She worked hard and excelled in everything that she did. Everything about her life seemed to be perfect. When she began to lose weight and carefully restrict her eating, her parents saw it as part of her already ingrained habits of doing everything well and right. They began to become alarmed and confused, however, when her weight dropped dangerously low and she adamantly refused to eat many of the foods that were prepared for the rest of the family. She became secretive about her eating and often disappeared into the bathroom following meals. Her parents could not understand what was happening to their perfect daughter. They struggled to understand what was raging inside of her, ruining her health and causing her to withdraw emotionally from her family. Like many high-achieving and perfectionist women, Lucy had developed an eating disorder. This was her way of feeling in control as the pressures in her life mounted.

Eating disorders, such as anorexia and bulimia, have existed since antiquity. We read about them in ancient Rome. It was a culture of excess. They had restaurants for socialized bulimia. It was part of the culture. People would recline and eat until they felt stuffed and uncomfortable, eating much more than their bodies needed. They would turn around to a trough of water that ran behind them and purge. These restaurants, called

vomitoriums, were a part of socializing. We read in medieval times of anorexia. It was a very unsafe time for women. There were wars, plagues, and social upheaval. We can read of many instances of women who would starve themselves in hope that this extreme self-control would bring them safety in an otherwise chaotic world. They had little power over their own lives. There is the story of Lady Elaine, the legendary wife of Sir Lancelot. She starved herself to death when she learned that her husband had been unfaithful. The emotions she felt from that betrayal were more than she could stand.

Symptoms of an Eating Disorder

What are the symptoms of an eating disorder? The two most common eating disorders are bulimia and anorexia. A symptom of bulimia is binge eating. The person loses control and eats very large amounts of food over a short period. This results in discomfort. Often the person does not even enjoy eating the food. They eat quickly until they become very uncomfortable. They attempt to compensate for the overeating by purging. Vomiting, laxatives, diuretics, enemas, excessive exercise and over-the-counter diet pills are all ways of purging. Ephedra was recently taken off the market because of the dangerous risk of heart attacks. Many of these over-the-counter diet pills will speed up metabolism, but also speed up the heart rate and leave a person vulnerable to heart attack. Excessive fasting is often used as a way of punishing oneself for overeating, or as a way of avoiding food to make up for eating too much. Individuals with bulimia also are unduly influenced by body shape and size. They overemphasize the importance of being thin.

Symptoms of anorexia include the refusal to maintain body weight of at least 85 percent of normal weight. This would be a body mass index of below 17. That would be like a woman my height, about 5'7", weighing less than 117 pounds. There is also a strong fear of gaining weight or of becoming fat even though the person is already underweight. Body image is disturbed and there is a denial of the low weight. A person with anorexia can look quite skeletal, but will focus on any body part they believe is fat. They view their body as overweight in spite of being very thin. Amenorrhea, a loss of the menstrual period, also occurs because the person is not eating enough food and getting enough nutrition to sustain regular menstrual cycles. If anorexia onset is at a very early age, a woman may just never develop normal menstrual cycles.

Eating Disorders Are Not Just About Eating

We have seen a dramatic rise in eating disorders. It is estimated that there are at least 5 million women in the United States and a growing number of men with eating disorders. Why are so many people ignoring the body's natural biological signals that regulate eating? We have regulatory mechanisms that tell us when to eat and when we're full. Many people ignore those signals and turn to disordered eating. The eating behavior is only the tip of the iceberg. Eating disorders are not just about food, but they represent much deeper problems. Problems such as fear of feeling out of control or wanting to get control of life, excessive stress, perfectionism, family relationship problems, concerns about identity and roles, cultural and social pressures to be thin, spiritual concerns or lack

of a correct understanding of spiritual concepts, difficulty understanding sexuality, and abuse or other distress to the body all contribute to eating disorders. When a person lacks either the skill or the resources to manage these struggles and problems, it becomes very easy to act out these emotional concerns through food.

Why food? Often at a very early age, children learn some conflicting messages about food and their bodies. First, they learn that food equals love and acceptance. The caretaker picks up the child, holds them, hugs them, and nurtures them while they are being fed. They learn that part of being loved is being fed. Food becomes associated with comfort and security. The child learns that if they are cared for, hunger pains will be comforted. This is a healthy association and it is good that we do learn to eat and to be loved, but then there is a conflicting message that can also be sent. It is a very dangerous message. The message may also be sent that thinness equals love and acceptance. If you are told that food is love, but you are also told that you must be thin to be loved, that sets up a conflict.

We see children as young as elementary school age who are already aware that thinness is necessary for acceptance. Here are two little girls looking at a scale and saying, “Don’t step on it; it makes you cry.” When young children begin to reach puberty, usually around ages 11 to 14, their bodies begin to grow taller and put on fat because of the increase in estrogen in their bodies. Young girls may feel uncomfortable as their bodies start to change, especially if they change at a different rate or a different size than their peers. They may feel that they are excessively large, or they may be uncomfortable with those changes in their bodies and want to retreat to a time when they felt more comfortable in a smaller body. It is important to help young girls feel comfortable with these changes and understand that variation in size and growth pattern is normal.

Food also easily becomes associated with many other functions other than the nutritional care of our bodies. In moderation, this helps enrich our lives. For example, we learn to self-soothe with food. Think about someone bringing you a nice bowl of hot soup when you have a cold. That feels good. We use food to nurture. We might send cookies to a friend or welcome a new person into our neighborhood with a loaf of bread. We use it for social validation. We validate the importance of events like birthdays or holidays by the food we prepare for that event. Food is also a defense against painful emotions. Sometimes just having a good hot fudge sundae makes the day go better. We use food for evidence of mastery, self-control, and spiritual renewal. Fasting for spiritual renewal, when done as the Lord directs, helps us feel closer to God. We use food to avoid boredom. We like variety in food. Trying new recipes keeps food interesting. We use food to get social approval. We have contests to see who bakes the best cookies or the best pies, or we invite our friends over to dinner to impress them with a nice meal. We use food to win and express love. We take a date or a spouse someplace special on their birthday or take friends out to eat when we want to show we care. All of these are socially acceptable ways of using food. However, if food is the main method a person has for managing emotions, then the associations that we have with food can lead to addictive or compulsive processes.

The Addiction Cycle

What is an addictive cycle or compulsive process? A person can become vulnerable to an addiction or compulsion whenever chronic stress exceeds the person's ability to cope. We also know that some people may have a biological vulnerability to addictive processes and slip into them more easily. If you look at the beginning of the cycle, it starts out with feeling emotions. A person may start to feel strong emotions. If they believe that those emotions are inherently bad, or they have no way to calm and soothe those feelings, they may try to block or shut down awareness of the pain of the feelings. It is easy to confuse the pain of emotions with hunger, feeling "stuffed," or feeling fat. Fat is not an emotion. However, when a person has a bad day, they may say, "I feel fat." It may be easier to call it "fat" than for them to say, "I feel sad", "I feel distressed," or "I feel lonely." If they do not know what to do with those emotions or have a blocked awareness of those emotions, they may experience shame and guilt for having such emotions. If they do not know how to manage the emotions, they may equate "if I feel bad that must mean that I am bad." They are embarrassed and ashamed of painful feelings. When they do not know what to do to calm and soothe those emotions, it is easy then to turn to a "quick fix." A "quick fix" is anything that alters our emotional state very quickly, but does not address the original problem that caused the painful feelings. "Quick fixes" also have dangerous or difficult consequences. Activities that are frequently used for a "quick fix" are drugs, alcohol, inappropriate sexual behavior, excessive spending, gambling, Internet addiction, and food.

Because those things do not really solve the problems of living, those problems return and continue. The real problem has been avoided or ignored and was never really solved. That leads to further feelings of being out of control and ashamed—then going back to the "quick fix" to solve the problem. The person easily becomes stuck in a cycle. Willpower is not sufficient to get out of this cycle. You will hear people say, "I've tried and I've tried and I've tried, and I just can't control my eating disorder." They are stuck in a cycle like this cartoon of a dog that says, "I chew shoes to relieve stress. I am stressed, because I'm a bad dog. I'm a bad dog because I chew shoes and I chew shoes to relieve stress." There is no way out. It takes more than just willpower. First, the dog must learn to do something other than chew shoes to relieve stress. Chewing shoes creates more stress by getting the dog in more trouble. The dog must learn some healthy way of reducing the stress and then stop beating himself up psychologically. He must learn to love and value himself in spite of his struggles.

Contributing Factors to Eating Disorders

Media and the diet industry

Many factors contribute to vulnerability to eating disorders. Young people are constantly bombarded by images of ultra thin women. The media conveys the message that there is only one way to be beautiful. Only about 3 percent of all women can actually achieve the media ideal of beauty without damaging their bodies. Many of the women idealized in the media do not have this natural body build, but achieve it through eating

disorders and then they pay for this look with the price of their health. All the consumer of the media sees is very, very thin women being held up as ideal.

The diet industry preys on this image and convinces women that unless they are constantly dieting, they will look unacceptable. Research on the long-term effects of dieting shows that it is a very ineffective way of managing weight over a lifetime. Going on and off diets actually harms the health and makes it more difficult to maintain weight. When people engage in “yo-yo” dieting and keep trying new diets, this upsets the natural metabolism of the body. It makes the body store fat and then with the next diet, it becomes harder to take that weight off. Dieting is a billion-dollar industry. Every year new fad diets keep coming along with their foods, their books, their videos, and their programs. This makes money for the diet industry. People go from one diet to another, looking for the magic bullet that will give them the kind of body build and slenderness that they seek in order to imitate the women they see in the media. Diets often lead to eating disorders as the person struggles harder to find a better diet and control eating.

God made bodies in many sizes, shapes, and colors. Healthy, well-cared-for bodies still vary a great deal in size and shape. In fact, there are limits to what we can do to change that natural healthy body size and shape without damaging our health. I believe that God’s view of beauty must be very different from that of the media culture. He made so many different ways of having a healthy body. Regular healthy, balanced eating combined with exercise is the only way to maintain a healthy, natural weight over the lifetime. Here we see a cartoon that says, “I’d like to exchange this exercise and diet video for one on self-acceptance.” Being able to see the beauty in many sizes and shapes is healthy. I applaud some of these new magazines that show beautiful women in sizes 14 on up through larger sizes. These women are healthy, but still have naturally larger body sizes than media ideals. Showing beauty in diversity of size, shape, and ethnic heritage helps women value their own unique beauty.

Eating to be healthy vs. eating to be thin

Supporting healthy eating and healthy lifestyles can provide a buffer against eating disorders. Many women that I have worked with are very hesitant to give up their disordered eating. They believe the only other choice is an unhealthy diet that is loaded with fats, cholesterol and sugar, and that furthers all of the health problems that come with that style of eating. They may not want to eat what their family eats if they fear that the family diet is equally unhealthy. Having easy and quick access to healthy fruits and vegetables, whole grains, lean protein, low-fat dairy, and healthy fats as found in nuts, olive oil, and avocados is important in recovering from an eating disorder. Even then, it is still important to stress that the goal is caring for the body in a healthy way—eating to be healthy rather than eating to be thin. The focus should be on health rather than body size and shape.

Perfectionism

Perfectionism is another very powerful contributor to an eating disorder. How does perfectionism differ from a healthy spiritual quest to grow, to improve, and to reach our divine potential? Christ’s admonition to be perfect, even as He is perfect, was not a

command to possess immediately all possible skills, talents, abilities, and good qualities. Christ's command was an invitation to enter into a covenant process that begins with baptism and is dependant on Christ's Atonement. A person may also lack a correct understanding of the nature of God. They may misinterpret Him as a demanding, punitive parent who is angry or withdraws His love if they fail to perform perfectly or are struggling with a weakness. Christ is the only one who ever led a perfect life. However, even He had to continue from grace to grace until He received a fullness.

Christ's command to enter into this covenant process differs from the counterfeit of perfectionism in many ways. With perfectionism the person sets unreasonable goals. For example, in mortality I was given a body that is not particularly athletic. I enjoy the out of doors and I do many fun things. My body serves me to do that. I do not excel in competitive sports, however. If I set a goal to become an Olympic athlete, I would set myself up to feel disappointed. I do not have that gift or talent. Setting realistic goals for what I can do prevents a sense of failure. With perfectionism, a person's self-worth is based mainly on achievements. They can never feel satisfied or good enough. They are always looking around and seeing someone else who does better. Self-worth is based on comparing themselves with the achievements of others. They feel unloved and invalidated unless they are constantly performing well. This makes it frightening to share mistakes and struggles without feeling embarrassed and ashamed. The person feels alone and isolated, because it is too shameful to admit to others that they struggle. There is no way to get support for that struggle. Perfectionists have an excessive fear of failure that is chronic and pervasive throughout their life. The outside world sets their standards for success and their goals exceed their present performance by a great degree. They set goals that are far from their present performance and then feel miserable until they can reach the goal. They cannot find any pleasure in progressing toward the goal. The focus is only on the outcome. Life becomes centered on "being in control."

How does perfectionism differ from a healthy quest for growth, progression, and eventual wholeness? First of all, the person can set realistic, obtainable goals. For example, for me, an obtainable goal is to exercise on a regular basis rather than becoming an Olympic athlete, to eat healthy rather than winning a gold medal. Healthy growth is also facilitated by knowing that our self-worth is inherent. Self-worth does not change with achievement or lack thereof. The gospel teaches us that God's love is unchanging. He continues to love us even when we struggle to change and grow. When self-worth is inherent, the person can feel good about the progress that they are making. They recognize their own uniqueness. They realize that not all gifts are given to everyone. We are each given different gifts, different talents, different struggles, and different challenges in mortality. When a person understands this, they can then base goals on individual circumstances. They can acknowledge themselves as valuable, while still recognizing human weaknesses, and can accept disappointments and struggles as part of the learning process. This makes it easier to get back up and keep trying. Their goals are derived from inner awareness rather than comparison with others, and they reflect growth to the next stage of progressive development. They are then able to enjoy the journey and keep life in balance.

I would like to share what Joseph Smith had to say about this process of Perfection.

When you climb a ladder, you must begin at the bottom and ascend step by step, until you arrive at the top and so it is with all the principles of the gospel. You must begin with the first and go on until you learn all of the principles of exaltation, but it will be a great while after you've passed through the veil, before you will have learned them. It is not all to be comprehended in this world. It will be a great work to earn our salvation even beyond the grave. (In L. E. Dahl and D. Q. Cannon [1997] Encyclopedia of Joseph Smith's Teachings [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft], 519).

What we are being asked to do is to enter into this covenant process; to continue to strive and progress; to pick ourselves up, change, and repent as we recognize problems; to endure to the end and then to trust in the Atonement. His grace is sufficient for us. We do not need to be obsessed with perfectionism in order to become perfected through Christ.

Identity and self-worth

Identity is also an issue that plays a role in the development of eating disorders. One of the tasks of adolescence and young adult life is to establish a sense of identity: "Who am I going to be in the adult world?" As young people become more independent, they make important choices about who they are going to be. That struggle in choosing an identity is often mirrored in their choice of clothes, music, and lifestyle. Adolescents may try to establish an identity not by who they are, but who they are not. This cartoon illustrates this kind of identity development. It shows a group of women at a quilting bee. One woman is very determined to express a different identity, and her portion of the quilt contradicts everything everyone else is doing. It says, "Muriel was never one to let tradition stand in the way of self-expression."

Women have more choices than ever before in history. We have opportunities available to us that no women have ever had. However, along with these choices also come pressures. These pressures can feel intense as young women try to form an adult identity. Many young women believe messages that they must do it all and do it all at once. They feel pressure to excel in everything and have difficulty choosing what to pursue and what to let go. Here we see an example of women reading a magazine that focuses on swimsuits:

Look at these models! Wouldn't it be cool to be that gorgeous?

Well, yes, but what you have to remember is that that body type isn't actually found in nature. Becoming the new feminine ideal requires just the right combination of insecurity, exercise, bulimia, and surgery.

Well, that sounds like a lot of trouble.

Well—it is.

Well, how am I supposed to do that and still fly for the navy?

Well—exactly.

The world presents a feminine ideal that says that women are expected to “bring home the bacon, fry it up too, and then look beautiful while they do it.” It is important that young people learn how to seek guidance from the Lord as they make those choices concerning what they will do with their lives. There are many divine sources of guidance in making important choices. One of the most important gifts we have is the gift of the Holy Ghost. The Holy Ghost can enlighten us as we study the scriptures. We can listen to the words of modern-day prophets, read our patriarchal blessings, and listen for personal answers to prayers. The Holy Ghost can help us make decisions concerning some of these hard choices, and we can receive the confidence and peace that comes from knowing that our lives are in harmony with God’s unique mission and purpose for us. We can live with the unpredictability and uncertainties of this world if our lives are centered in Christ. If our identity is based on knowing that we are a spirit child of heavenly parents with a divine potential to become like them, this provides a foundation for identity. This can be the stable identity that never changes, even when the circumstances of our lives may change.

Relationships

Relationships are also a frequent source of struggle that can lead to soothing painful emotions with food. As one young adult woman remarked to me, “Potato chips are so much easier to relate to than men. They’re always there when you need them. They do whatever I want and when I’m sick of them I can just throw them back up.” She was struggling with the pain of not knowing how to have a relationship with a man. She comforted that pain by bingeing on potato chips.

As young people begin to expand their relationships beyond the family, they may struggle with learning how to become independent and make relationships beyond the family. If parents hover too closely over a child, it can send the message that the world is a frightening place and that it is dangerous to get close to anyone outside the family. Here we see a cartoon with a mother and daughter sunbathing. The mother says, “Did Cathy put on enough sunscreen? Is she drinking enough fluids? Is she burning her eyeballs by reading in the sun? Did she remember to turn. . . ?” Mom is overcome by worries. The daughter says, “Are you asleep, Mom?” The mother says, “Mothers never sleep. We just worry lying down with our eyes shut.” This is so easy for parents to do. We do love our children and we do worry. However, it is important to teach children correct principles and then help them learn how to govern themselves. They need to know that they can make wise decisions and trust themselves.

I remember struggling with one of my children as he was growing up. I prayed to the Lord, “What do I do with this child? I’m really struggling to understand how to help him.” As I read the scriptures I read through the story of the Creation and that spiritual voice spoke to me and said: “This is how you raise this child. Do not try to put the animals on the planet even before the waters have been divided. Relax, Mother. Trust this process of growth and development that your child is going through.” I needed to learn to stop being a “helicopter mother” who hovered over my child, constantly trying to protect him from the consequences of his own decisions. Let the child grow up.

Taking an extreme approach in the other direction can be equally difficult for young people. It is difficult for a child to be thrown into activities and responsibilities that are too mature for their developmental skills. Exposing children to adult roles and responsibilities when they are not ready can overwhelm a young person. When life feels chaotic and uncontrollable, it is then easy to try to feel more in control by controlling food.

Events that disrupt relationships such as moving, parental divorce, or loss of other important people and relationships can often trigger the onset of an eating disorder. Many young people see appearance as the main thing that they have to offer in order to be close and belong. They may not understand the role that skills such as learning how to address and resolve conflict, how to solve interpersonal problems, how to communicate with others, and how to share interests, activities, and values all contribute to good interpersonal relationships. These skills all play important roles in establishing good relationships. Learning these skills can create a stronger basis for relationships than just buying the same clothes from the same store.

Emotional management

Lack of skill in managing emotions can lead to misuse of food. Our bodies are capable of feeling many powerful emotions. We are made in the image of God and we are taught that He is a God with body parts and passions. “Passions” is another word for strong feelings and emotions. We feel emotions in our bodies. We cannot become like God and have a fullness of joy without our bodies. As young people’s bodies grow and mature, they may begin to feel many passions much more powerfully than they did as children. Emotions of joy, sadness, distress, love, physical attraction, and all the full range of human emotional experiences erupt into full bloom in adolescence. This can sometimes feel very frightening. When emotions or other passions feel overwhelming, a person may try to shut off feelings and other messages from the body. Eating, as well as overcontrol by not eating, can be used to silence emotions felt in the body.

The scriptures teach us that we should bridle our passions. We read in Alma, “and also see that ye bridle all your passions, that ye may be filled with love” (Alma 38:12). Think for a moment about the purpose of a bridle in managing a horse. The horse is a great gift. It is not inherently evil. It can provide a means of power, of joy, and of exhilaration. The bridle is the means by which we channel the direction and speed of the horse. To bridle the horse means that we are in charge—not the horse. It does not mean that we beat the horse to death, punish it, deny its blessings, or deny all the wonderful things that the horse is capable of doing for us. We must treat the horse well if we are to have a relationship where the horse will serve us. We must bridle that horse, however, in order to channel the direction and speed. So it is with all the gifts of the body. As Latter-day Saints, we are very fortunate to have restored to us a correct understanding of the true purpose of the body. Understanding that the body and the spirit constitute the soul of men and women is essential in knowing how to respond to the body’s signals. We should lovingly care for our bodies; listen to signals and information from the body. We can then learn how to make wise decisions about how we respond. If we just ignore these signals

or shut them down, we lose important information. Learning how to tell the difference between hunger cues and our emotions is an important step in overcoming an eating disorder. If you try to feed loneliness with food or punish yourself for feeling angry by denying your body what it truly needs to be healthy, you become cut off and confused about the messages your body tries to send. The body then becomes a stranger and an enemy.

Skills for emotional regulation

Emotional regulation is an important skill in being able to manage emotions. I have listed four steps that can help you to understand and regulate emotions.

The first is to be aware. Rather than cutting yourself off from your body's signals, listen to them and be aware. Try to identify the trigger and message of that emotion.

Second, understand that we are made in God's image with bodies that are eventually destined to become like His. Accept and understand this divine inheritance. Emotions are not the enemy. Listen to the message of the emotion, rather than judging it. If you cut off your emotions, you will miss information that can help you to make wise decisions. Seek to understand rather than to judge your emotions.

The third step is accepting responsibility for managing the emotion. This means that you can make a decision about how to respond to emotion. For example, recognizing and acknowledging that you feel angry does not have to result in blowing up, hitting someone, or doing something dangerous or something that will damage your relationships. You have other choices concerning what you do with the anger.

The next step is problem solving. Once you have recognized that a problem does exist, begin to explore solutions and options. You can test out the consequences of those decisions in your mind before you act on the emotions. You can learn and grow by facing problems rather than avoiding emotions. Learning from mistakes, changing and repenting, trying a different solution, studying it out in your mind before you act, loving yourself, and respecting your emotions all build skills for emotional management. Learning emotional regulation skills leads to real solutions to your problems, rather than just trying to solve the problem through food.

Stress

Our bodies send us many signals that help us understand what we need. They can tell us when we are tired, hungry, overstressed, coming down with an illness, need the companionship of caring people, have a broken heart, bored, or other important information that helps keep our lives balanced. Keeping life balanced rather than trying to control everything helps us to stay physically, mentally, and spiritually well. We cannot give 100 percent to every activity we engage in, because we only have 100 percent to start with. We have to take that 100 percent and then decide how to divide it up and keep our life balanced. Learning how to balance life is demands, rather than frantically trying to keep life under control, reduces the stress that leads to emotional eating.

Many women may also purge in order to regain relief from intense stress. When a person throws up, the body says, “This person is ill. I need to comfort them and protect them.” The body will naturally release endorphins and other natural body opiates into the bloodstream. This creates a sense of relaxation and euphoria. A person can easily become addicted to this feeling. They become stuck in a binge/purge cycle to gain relief from stress. There are many other ways of getting your body to relax that are healthy and won’t cause you to have this kind of difficulty—listening to beautiful music, engaging in healthy exercise, having enjoyable recreation, taking some time off to reduce stress by spending time out in nature, engaging in wholesome activities with friends. . .all of these things can provide healthy relief from stress. Until a person is willing to work on reducing stress in healthy ways, it is difficult to overcome an eating disorder. It is important that we teach our children and remind ourselves that the Lord has told us that it is not necessary to run faster than we have strength. We have permission from the Lord to keep our lives balanced.

Abuse and trauma to the body

Abuse and other distress to the body can also lead to an eating disorder. One in every three to five women has an unwanted, aggressive, sexual experience in her life. That is a very high number. This world is often not a safe place for women. We need to be doing more to protect innocent people from rape and all forms of abuse. There are over two million reported cases of child abuse and neglect every year and over 140 thousand injuries to children’s bodies because of abuse.

Chronic illness, accidents, and other physical trauma can also create distress to the body that may lead to an eating disorder. Whenever the body is hurt, injured, abused, or neglected, it becomes more difficult to see the body as an ally and a friend. The body feels betrayed. It may require professional help to learn healthy attitudes and care of the body following trauma or abuse. It is important to learn that you do not have to tolerate abuse of your body and you have the right to protect your body.

Spiritual concerns

Having a correct understanding of spiritual truths can help people who struggle with eating disorders. There are four truths that I have identified as helpful for LDS people to understand in order to recover from an eating disorder.

First is a correct understanding of mortality and the plan of salvation. We came to earth to have a mortal experience. It is a time of learning, growth, and experiencing many things we have never experienced before. We spent a long time in premortal life learning and growing, but we never had a body before our birth into mortality. It may take awhile to learn how to live in this body. Sometimes, even when we are doing our best and keeping commandments in mortality, we may still experience pain. Life hurts. Perfectionism cannot protect you from having mortal experiences. If you believe that having control of everything in your life and being perfect in everything you do will protect you, you will be disappointed. Even Christ’s perfect life allowed Him to experience pain, sorrow, disappointment, and betrayal. Not all painful experiences in life are a result of sin.

The second principle is a correct understanding of the Atonement. The Atonement differs from perfectionism. If you err while you are learning from these new experiences—learn from those experiences, repent, let them go, and go on. The Atonement provided the possibility for change, growth, and repentance. It was God’s love for us that made it possible to learn from mortality, change, repent, grow, and still be able to return home to our Father in Heaven. It also provides for an eventual healing of our sorrows and disappointments, hurts and betrayals, afflictions and diseases. We can turn those problems over to Christ, rather than constantly beat ourselves up psychologically. When we have faith in the Atonement, we can continue to progress.

The third is to understand the true nature of God. He is a kind and loving Father. He does not abandon us when we need Him most. It is all right to talk to Him about our weaknesses. I see many women who struggle with eating disorders who say, “I could never go to the Lord in prayer about my eating disorder. I am too ashamed. I am too unworthy.” God is a father who does not abandon His children when they need Him most. He wants us to take our struggles to Him. He wants us to confess to Him where it hurts and where we are having problems. He reaches down to help us. He loves us.

The fourth principle is to understand the true identity and nature of self. We must know for ourselves that we are sons and daughters of heavenly parents with a potential to become like them. God did not send us here to fail. We may struggle, it may take time, it may be a slow process, it may require considerable effort, but know that you are God’s child, even in the midst of those struggles.

Helping a Loved One

Recognizing the problem

How do you know that a loved one is struggling with an eating disorder? One of the problems with an eating disorder is the secrecy. Often there is so much shame and embarrassment that a person will not reach out for help. How could you recognize if someone you love may be struggling? Here are some things to look for:

- 1) Rapid weight loss of more than 25 percent or a body mass index below 19. For example, that would be 5’7” and below 120 pounds or 5’2” and below 102 pounds.
- 2) Prolonged excessive exercise despite fatigue, injury, or weakness. Excessive or compulsive exercise is a form of purging. The person is forcing the body into harmful activity that is going to hurt their body.
- 3) Intense fear of gaining weight or insisting on dieting even though the person is slim.
- 4) Peculiar food habits such as cutting food into little tiny pieces, chewing, and then spitting out food or abstaining from major food groups like refusing to eat any fat.
- 5) Amenorrhea, which is the loss of the menstrual cycle. If the eating disorder starts at an early age, menstruation may never begin.
- 6) Episodes of bingeing and purging more than once a week for three months or longer. Sometimes young people will experiment with bingeing and purging but quickly catch themselves and say “I’m not going to do this. This is not a good

- thing,” and they will quit. If the bingeing and purging persists for more than three months, or they are bingeing and purging more than once a week, that is a sign a person is developing an eating disorder.
- 7) Depression, suicidal thoughts, or history of trauma. This may suggest that the eating problems cover deeper concerns and the person is attempting to manage the emotional pain of those problems with food. Poor nutrition can also lead to chemical depression.
 - 8) Physical symptoms such as hair loss, fainting spells, frequent intestinal disturbance, frequent sore throat, swollen glands or cheeks, erosion of the teeth, tears in the esophagus, and the growth of soft, downy hair on the body. All of these may be physical consequences of eating disorders.

Eating disorders are dangerous. It's been estimated that as high as 25 percent of all people who have a long-term eating disorder eventually die from the medical consequences of that disorder, so it is important to take it seriously and seek help.

Suggestions for Helping

How do you help someone who struggles? What do you do if someone you know is struggling with an eating disorder? Here are some suggestions for being helpful.

- 1) Reinforce definitions of success that focus on the person's personal qualities rather than their performance, achievement, or appearance. For example, being a good friend may be more important than winning a competition. Worth does not equal performance.
- 2) Honor diversity of appearance and body build. Beauty is found in many sizes, shapes, and colors. Do not make derogatory comments about certain body types. I frequently hear women who have struggled with eating disorders tell me, “My brothers or my father were always making fun of women with bigger hips. I never wanted to look like that.” Do not make derogatory statements about other people's bodies.
- 3) Be aware of how competition and perfectionism can negatively affect relationships. Relationships are not built by beating out others. We feel closest to those people with whom we can share our struggles and support one another.
- 4) Be inclusive rather than exclusive. Provide a place of value and belonging for everyone regardless of their size, their talents, or their appearance.
- 5) Keep conversations about eating supportive and confidential, rather than adversarial. Focus on concern for health rather than on concern for weight or appearance. Never force or pressure a child into losing weight in order to look more attractive. Focus on eating to be healthy rather than eating to be thin.
- 6) Do not try to change the behavior yourself. Seek help from God and appropriate church leaders. Seek competent professional help, if necessary. Do not get discouraged if change is slow. Often there is relapse when people are trying to recover from an addictive process. The person may do well for a while and then they may relapse. This does not mean they have gone back to the beginning. If you watch the behavior over time, you do see change and growth.

7) Be yourself. Share your own struggles and challenges. Be open and real. Set a good model for acknowledging your own humanness. Do not set a model of perfectionism.

8) Remember that a person with an eating disorder is just that—a person first and only secondarily a person who has problems with food. Do not let the eating disorder take over all of your relationship with that person.

Reducing the Risk

How can we make a safer world that reduces the vulnerability to eating disorders? Here are some protective and preventative factors.

First, teach correct spiritual principles and encourage young people to govern themselves. Teach young people to seek personal help through prayer, scripture study, patriarchal blessings, and listening to the Holy Ghost. Help them learn that they can trust spiritual processes to help them make decisions in an uncertain and dangerous world.

Provide role models of personally empowered, competent women in all body sizes and shapes, reflecting multiple life experiences. Encourage them to discover God's plan for them personally, rather than to compare themselves negatively with others.

Teach skills for effective conflict resolution and assertiveness. Help young people learn that they can resolve interpersonal problems, rather than fleeing from relationships and feeling isolated and alone. Teach them assertiveness so they can make wise decisions and then defend themselves with what they believe.

Secure safety for normal, appropriate development. Protect young people from premature exposure to adult roles and responsibilities. Do not push kids to grow up too fast.

Mentor young girls and young women for learning adult roles and responsibilities. Some may not just pick up those skills and need more direct instruction. The adult world may feel frightening. Help them learn skills to live in the adult world.

Improve relationships with other women. Focus on caring and cooperation instead of competition.

Teach women how to counteract media messages. Help them process reality. Help them see media messages for what they are—they are an attempt to sell a product, a philosophy, or a lifestyle that may not bring the happiness young women seek. Media messages often do not reflect reality.

Conceptualize the body as a facilitator of multiple functions, not just appearance. Emphasize that function is more important than form. Our bodies serve us in many wonderful ways and they help us to serve others. Our bodies give us power and blessings. We are not just eye-candy or arm-decorations.

Supply accurate information about nutrition, metabolism, genetic differences, and dieting. Be respectful of individual differences. Not all people eat best on three large meals a day. Some people's bodies may do better if they eat five small meals a day. Encourage respect for those differences. Support eating in response to cues of hunger and satiety, rather than forcing them into a schedule that may not work for their body.

Taking a Spiritual Perspective

A spiritual perspective can strengthen family relationships when a family member struggles with an eating disorder. Christ has promised peace to us if we have faith in Him (see John 14:27, 16:33). That promise of peace is not a promise of a perfect life or a perfect family without struggles, temptations, and challenges. That promise of peace is not peace “as the world giveth.” It is a peace that comes from a correct understanding of the plan of salvation and from having faith in Christ. Christ, who calmed the tempest, stilled the sea, and had control over the elements, can also calm our souls and bring peace to our troubled hearts. This peace will enable us to continue toward exaltation and eternal life with faith and hope.

I say this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.