

A P A R E N T ' S
T O
G U I D E

Eating Disorders

Thanks to the buzz around Netflix’s film *To the Bone*, eating disorders have recently been in the limelight. There are myriad websites and organizations dedicated to educating the public about eating disorders and to helping sufferers find lasting recovery, so rather than adding to that, this guide will hopefully serve to educate you about how technology and culture contribute to the problem. In addition, we hope to provide a balanced Christian perspective on how to find true healing from a disease that affects both young and old, male and female, Christian and non-Christian alike. (Note: We did our best not to link to sites that could be triggering for those struggling with eating disorders, except when necessary. If you choose to search for things mentioned in this guide, please do so at your own risk. It can be simultaneously horrifying and heartbreaking.)

What are the basics I need to know?

[Eating disorders defined](#); [list of eating disorders](#) (plus a [list of less-common disorders](#)); [who gets them](#); [causes of eating disorders](#); and [risk factors](#).

Many celebrities have struggled with eating disorders, which can serve to glamorize eating disorders in teens’ eyes (especially because teens have a window into celebs’ lives through social media). A few of the more well-known celebs are: [Zayn Malik](#) (singer, One Direction), [Troian Bellisario](#) (actress, *Pretty Little Liars*), [Demi Lovato](#) (singer & Disney star), [Kesha](#) (singer), [Zoe Kravitz](#) (actress, the *Divergent* series), [Candace Cameron Bure](#) (actress, *Full House*), and [Shawn Johnson](#) (Olympic gymnast) (and if you don’t know any of these names, you might remember this one: [Karen Carpenter](#)).

What are the not-so-basics I need to know?

Sadly, there’s an entire subculture on the Internet that [encourages and promotes](#) eating disorders. Pro-anorexia (usually [Pro-Ana](#)) and pro-bulimia (Pro-Mia) websites abound, and a quick Google search will yield countless blogs and Tumblrs that detail weight-loss goals and methods, as well as tips for avoiding attention from concerned family and friends. One can also find “thinspiration” (or “thinspo,” images that range from thin to downright skeletal) in less than a second via a search engine or by searching hashtags like #ana, #mia, #thinspo, #thighgap, #bonespo (bone inspiration), and #EDfam on any social network (though [some sites have attempted](#) to prevent pro-eating-disorder posts, [with little success](#)). However, specifically searching for these things isn’t the only way to find them; simply entering phrases like “fitness tips,” “fitspiration/fitspo,” or “weight loss” can also be an introduction to the world of eating disorders.

Ana and Mia?

Short for “anorexia” and “bulimia,” the Pro-Ana community has created these personas (and #Debbie for depression) as ways to “encourage” individuals to push through whatever “setbacks” or “temptations” they may be experiencing in achieving their goals. There are even [pledges](#) to Ana and things written from Ana’s voice, many of which are harsh and tell a person to never be satisfied with his/her body.

Why are eating disorders on the rise?

There are many contributing factors, but we believe that underlying all of them is our modern concept of freedom. Elsa from *Frozen* [describes it best](#): “No right, no wrong, no rules for me! I’m free!” If freedom is the ability to do what I want whenever I want with whomever I want as long as I’m not hurting anyone else, then saying how much or how little a person should weigh or eat is confining, restrictive, and repressive. Though this definition is fundamentally flawed (as G.K. Chesterton puts it in his book *Orthodoxy*, “The more I considered Christianity, the more I found that while it had established a rule and order, the chief aim of that order was to give room for good things to run wild”), it is nevertheless the reigning principle that children are being taught by ads, magazines, celebrities, books, friends, social media, movies, music, YouTube, and virtually every other medium.

Why would someone ever want to be part of this?

Understanding the appeal of it can be hard, but it’s of paramount importance. To do so, first think about our culture. Women (and increasingly men) are surrounded by images of perfectly sculpted, gorgeous, flawless bodies (yes, bodies...they’re often [depicted without heads](#)). And these images are typically connected in one way or another to some level of happiness (how else would companies sell products?). So young, impressionable minds see such images and connect physical appearance, beauty, thinness, and perfection with happiness, popularity, self-worth, and success. But now, unlike generations before, young people have screens in their pockets that encourage them to focus on their appearance while incessantly delivering these images of “beauty,” whether they’re looking for them or not.

Second, family and peer relationships can play major roles in whether or not someone develops an eating disorder. [This man](#) was fat-shamed as a child by his mother (because she learned it from her own mother), as well as bullied by his peers for being “ugly” and fat, which contributed to his eating disorders and other destructive addictions. [This woman](#) witnessed her mother’s yo-yo dieting, fear of “fat,” and hatred of her body, which the woman inevitably learned and put into practice in her early tween and teen years. Then, because of the praise and attention she received for being so thin, her disorder spiraled out of control. We cannot underestimate the power of relationship in our lives. And in our increasingly digital world, off-handed or mean-spirited comments are so easy to send and seem insignificant to the sender, but can wreak havoc on the receiver.

Third, [these teen girls](#) reveal that many with eating disorders don’t view it as a problem to fix; rather, [they see it as a lifestyle](#) that’s “worth it.” Many with eating disorders also mention that once they joined a pro-eating-disorder community online, they felt they finally had a place to belong. As one psychiatrist says, “Eating disorders can be extremely isolating conditions, and so finding a community of other people who think like you can be a powerful draw.” And because these communities are digital and often exclusive (i.e. hidden from concerned adults), the disorders become glamorized while the consequences of encouraging others to continue in their habits are never observed.

Finally, [many survivors of eating disorders](#) can pinpoint the beginning of their troubles to a traumatic experience: bullying/ridicule, abuse, a breakup, parents’ divorce, loss of a loved one, moving to a new place. They often mention controlling their bodies as a way to cope with the intense emotional pain from that trauma, saying they can’t control anything else, but they can control food. **And often, many turn to eating disorders not to get skinny, but to feel release from pain.**

What about spiritual warfare?

We know that the enemy “[prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.](#)” And he will use anything—an offhanded comment, an advertisement, an insecurity, feeling left out or different, trauma, stress, peer pressure, loss of a loved one, anything—to his advantage. His goal, as always, is to steal the abundant life Christ has given us. He does this by offering the very thing we long for: a sense of control, acceptance, community, to look a certain way, freedom from bullying...

Of course, whatever semblance of those things that can be found through eating disorders and the pro-eating-disorder community is fleeting and incomplete, a sad and unsatisfying approximation of the true version of those things, which is found only in Christ. But from the outside looking in, it's not easy to tell that this is the case, precisely because of the nature of counterfeits. Unless one is trained to notice the slight differences, to look beyond the immediate appearance, it appears to be the real thing in order to draw in its next victim, only to leave him/her more empty, isolated, broken, and desperate than before.

So when dealing with eating disorders, it's helpful to keep this in mind, both for how you pray and how you help someone who is suffering. But also keep in mind that our enemy may not be behind every eating disorder. The problem can also stem from having a skewed perspective of God, the world, and ourselves. So we need to be mindful of both aspects, praying for protection against spiritual attack and for God to renew our children's minds.

Anything else I should know about?

There are many ways for teens to keep in contact with their pro-Ana friends. Even if you disable Internet browsing on their devices, they can still use a friend's device to get online. [One woman's concerned friend](#) deleted her account on a pro-Ana website, but the woman just got in touch with them through an exercise app on her phone. So unless your child wants to recover (more on that below), he/she will continue to find ways to connect with his/her pro-ED friends, relating stories of “my crazy mom/dad/friend who just doesn't get it and keeps trying to make me stop lol.”

How can I tell if my child has an eating disorder?

Some of them have physical manifestations (e.g. anorexia is marked by extreme weight loss and an obsession with calorie counting and exercise). Others aren't as obvious (anything that falls under [OSFED](#)), so taking some time to familiarize yourself with the [signs](#) and [symptoms](#) of the different disorders, as well as to observe the person in question, will be helpful. Monitoring their online activities may also be revealing. However, the best way to really know is to ask your child, but prayerfully and carefully consider this option. On one hand, it may help them break the isolation, secrecy, and shame if you offer him/her a loving and safe environment in which to admit his/her struggles. On the other, he/she may not yet be ready to confront his/her issues or admit there's a problem, so asking about it could cause more harm than good.

What do I do if my child has an eating disorder?

Actually, don't do anything...until you've had time to pray extensively, talk to experts and pastors, and formulate a strategy. Because, as a mental illness, an eating disorder is [an outward manifestation of a deeper problem](#): bullying, sexual/physical/emotional abuse, an inability to cope with major life changes, pressure to look and be a certain way, unhealthy relationships, [body dysmorphic disorder](#), or something else entirely. Simply confronting the unhealthy relationship with food and exercise may, at best, miss the point altogether and, at worst, compound the underlying issues, further pushing him/her into their destructive behaviors. Anorexia has the [highest mortality rate](#) of any mental illness, so taking the time to formulate a strategy and get him/her the help he/she needs can't be stressed enough.

What do you recommend I include in my strategy?

Prayer! Prayer is such a vital part of our lives, and it is the most important work we can do. Only God knows all the different facets of a person's struggles, and only He is powerful enough to deal with them and gracious enough to do so in the kindest way possible. So pray for your child and his/her heart often, but also pray with your child. Powerful things happen when we intercede for and on behalf of others. Though your child may not like it at first, he/she will come to see your heart and God's heart for them through the process.

Therapy. Depending on the extent of one's disorder, it may make sense to consider an [inpatient treatment program](#) in your area. If that's not the correct route for you, then we highly recommend finding a Christian therapist who specializes in eating disorder treatment. Because of the reality of spiritual warfare, we believe that going through therapy that is not biblically based would by nature ignore a very real and powerful component of the disorders. In addition, if the environment in which your child grew up encouraged such behavior, then returning to that environment will be toxic. Take some time to honestly examine your own home and relationship to food and health. If you believe that you may have contributed to that environment, consider therapy for yourself as well. It would speak volumes to your child about how much you care if you're also willing to make changes.

A safe environment. A huge component of eating disorders is feeling different, unaccepted, and isolated. Make your home and your relationship with your child a safe place to talk through feelings, incidents, fears, insecurities, and relapses without fear of repercussions. **It's only in the light that we find freedom, not the darkness.**

Self-reflection. Though not always the case, teens often pick up unhealthy mentalities from their parents or another influential adult. Take time to think about what was modeled to your child, and if it's something they observed in you, repent and ask God to forgive you, then repent to your child and ask them to forgive you. Consider therapy for yourself, too. If it's something they observed in someone else, open a discussion with your child about how he/she thinks it might have influenced him/her and if it might be healing to talk to that person.

Restriction of privileges. This is an area that requires great wisdom and insight. But in cases of younger children, restricting their device and Internet time may be necessary to keep harmful influences at bay. Some children just aren't mature enough to resist temptation or to make healthy choices on their own, so if possible, protect them. If you do go this route, always explain *why* you made the choices you made and keep the door open for discussing them. Restrictions without explanations may be seen as controlling and mean-spirited, rather than loving and protective.

Patience. Sometimes, the best thing we can do is get out of God's way and let Him do what He does best. You've said all you can say, you've offered every avenue of help you can, and now God needs time to move in your child's heart. God, in His omniscience, may be trying to teach you something as well. So make time to quiet yourself before the Lord and allow Him to speak to you. If we are intentional enough to be sensitive to His voice, He will reveal to us what we need to do and when we need to do it.

Scripture. If your child is willing, take time to search Scripture together for God's truth about our identity, worth, and value as children of God. Create a list of passages that you can pray together and over him/her when it seems he/she is losing the battle. If your child is not ready for this step, we still encourage you to do this for yourself so that you can pray Scripture over him/her. But *never* use the passages as a way to condemn your child; that will only compound their shame and feelings of not being good enough.

— **What do I do if my child doesn't want help or won't admit there's a problem?**

Watching someone willfully destroy his/her life is heartbreaking. If this is the case for you, know that we understand your frustration, anger, sadness, and fear. But, as seen in relapsed drug addicts and alcoholics, until the motivation comes from within, people will continue to return to their destruction. Or, stated another way, until people understand they've settled for far less than the thriving, abundant life Christ offers, they will continue to believe there's no other way, that they've done the best possible with the hands they were dealt. No amount of nagging and pleading will solve the problem until the heart issues are confronted and rooted out.

So once you've lovingly communicated why you hope and pray for better for your child, the phrase "It's time to stop saying and start praying" may apply. Rather than beating your child over the head with stats, new treatment options, and rants about how it's destroying his/her life, rest in the assurance that he/she knows where you stand. Then continue to pursue relationship with him/her. **Any influence in your child's life, however small, is better than no influence.**

Note: You know your child and his/her circumstances best. In cases where serious physical harm or death may be imminent, intervention is needed. But in other cases, simply loving them, providing an open line of communication, and praying fervently may be much more effective than continuing to alienate by belaboring the point.

— **Who can provide the professional help I need?**

If you're looking for someone local, we highly encourage asking friends and family or at your church for recommendations of competent Christian counselors, therapists, or psychologists.

We also strongly recommend looking into [Parent Coaching from Restoration Counseling](#)! We know that dealing with something like eating disorders can be confusing, painful, and extremely difficult, so what if someone came alongside you with fresh ideas, hopeful Christian insight, and proven parenting techniques? We've partnered with Restoration Counseling to bring you professional, affordable coaching that goes beyond the surface and provides personalized next steps for you and your family. (*cont.*)

Each of the virtual sessions can be scheduled at a time that is convenient for you and will provide you with valuable insight to your situation and how best to deal with it. Allow them to help you strengthen your family, bring hope to your kids, and build lifelong faith in Christ. Check out all the details at www.restorationcounselingnoco.com/parent-coaching and use the promo code **AXIS17** to receive 15% off!

— The Bottom Line

Eating disorders aren't just terrible because of their physical effects; **they're horrible because they promise freedom and control, yet lead to total enslavement**—enslavement to image, comparison, others' opinions, secrecy, isolation, suffering, and never being enough. This is why eating disorders are so insidious, and it's what we need to focus on as we disciple others through and out of the grips of their eating disorders. "[It is for freedom Christ has set us free](#)"! That is, we were made for true freedom, the kind that is found within God's boundaries because those boundaries keep evil out, allowing good to flourish. Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice so that we could have life and "[have it to the full](#)." We find that *only* through allowing Him to control our lives, as scary as that might seem.

Those who suffer from eating disorders in one way or another got to where they are because of one thing: fear. Fear of others' opinions, fear of abandonment, fear of ostracism, fear of what they felt inside, fear of heartache and suffering, fear of loss. And sometimes, these fears have become so central to who they are, they can't bear to admit them, let alone let go of them.

God's Word is clear that [fear has no place in our lives](#) when we're filled with His love. In fact, [Jesus' number one imperative](#) to us is to "fear not." Why? Because He knows that fear breeds insecurity, self-preservation, anger, dysfunction, and suffering, whereas love unlocks confidence, acceptance, self-sacrifice, peace, unity, flourishing, and grace. So, as Christ's ambassadors and as parents, it becomes our job to help those suffering from eating disorders embrace the love-filled abundant life and no longer let their fears define them.

To do this, it's imperative that we see beyond the obvious physical manifestations to the deeper heart issues. It also means being willing to walk down the path of healing with our children. That may mean attending therapy with them, talking through past wounds, admitting fault where necessary, and not being too critical of them. When teens see that *real* freedom—the ability to be exactly who God made them to be—lies only in letting go of fear and control and turning it all over to God, that's when they'll be ready to write a new story for themselves, one full of hope, redemption, mercy, and love.

God wants more than outward obedience; He wants to bring deep, lasting healing to your children's lives. Have patience and faith that He is already hard at work to make that happen!

In the meantime, may we devote ourselves to being part of God's plan of transformation by loving our children as Jesus loves us: By taking their burdens, by sacrificing our time and energy for them, by investing in them, by patiently drawing them out of their old selves and into their redeemed selves, and by [driving out fear with love](#).