

A Parent's Guide to
**EATING
DISORDERS**



**Parent
Ministry**

*"We turn skeletons into goddesses and look to them
as if they might teach us how not to need."*

— Marya Hornbacher,
Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia



The Catholic Youth Community of St. John Neumann

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This guide will help you discuss the following questions:

- ✓ What are eating disorders?
- ✓ How does social media play into the portrayal of eating disorders?
- ✓ Why do eating disorders run the risk of being glamorized?
- ✓ Why are eating disorders on the rise?
- ✓ What can helping a teen with an eating disorder look like?
- ✓ What insight does Scripture offer on eating disorders?

Not All that Glitters

Eating disorders have, for a long time, been a side effect of fame. Many celebrities have struggled with eating disorders in the past or presently, including Taylor Swift, Jessica Alba, Demi Lavato, Kate Winslet, Ed Sheeran, Robert Pattinson, Taylor Lautner, and famously [Karen Carpenter](#), one-half of the 1970s musical duo The Carpenters. Karen passed away at the age of 32 from heart failure due to complications from anorexia—one of many dangerous eating disorders. (Full disclosure... Karen Carpenter is one of my favorite all-time singers. I can only imagine what great music we were deprived of because of the disease!)

But celebrities certainly aren't the only ones who battle eating disorders. Besides increases in mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, today's teens also face heightened risks of developing eating disorders. Between access to social media and the constant presence of pop culture, teens are faced with portrayals of unhealthy eating habits and deeper eating distress everywhere they look.

As there are myriad websites and organizations dedicated to educating the public about eating disorders and helping sufferers find lasting recovery, the goal of this guide will be to help give you information on how technology and current culture uniquely contribute to the issue of teens and eating disorders.

I am not a mental health professional and cannot offer medical advice or treatment of any kind. My goal, through this OPM resource, is to come alongside parents with research and encouragement. If you believe that you or someone in your care is struggling with an eating disorder, I encourage you to seek professional help from a counselor, therapist, or doctor with skills and training to help you find healing.

What are eating disorders?

According to the [Mayo Clinic](#),

Eating disorders are serious health conditions that affect both your physical and mental health. These conditions include problems in how you think about food, eating, weight and shape, and your eating behaviors. These symptoms can affect your health, your emotions, and your ability to function in important areas of life.

Eating disorders are [considered by the American Psychiatric Association](#) to be mental illnesses, and include more well-known disorders like anorexia and bulimia, as well as binge eating disorders and food restriction disorders, among others. Eating disorders primarily affect women between the ages of 12 and 35 but can affect anyone regardless of gender or age.

It's also important to note that there is a difference between an eating disorder and disordered eating. Eating disorders have specific symptoms and can be categorized into distinct types, whereas disordered eating is any kind of relationship with food where a person eats or does not eat, and chooses what they eat, based on anything other than how hungry they are and what kind of nourishment they need. This kind of disordered eating can be hard to recognize because it's often promoted by diets or calorie counting, or because many people have an emotional relationship with food and eat or don't eat to control or manage their feelings. Probably most of us have experienced unhealthy relationships with food in one way or another, but only 5% of the population has been diagnosed with eating disorders.

Eating disorders are dangerous because food is an essential and basic human need. To live and live well we not only need regular nourishment but specific balances of food content to be healthy. Not eating at all is dangerous, but binge eating, restricted eating, and any other behavior that prevents us from receiving regular, well-rounded nourishment from food can cause deep damage to our bodies.

Food is also meant to serve us. The preparation, serving, and consumption of food can be emotionally edifying (who among us hasn't experienced the unique joy of a fresh-baked chocolate chip cookie?) but food is not meant to control us or our feelings in any way. Many eating disorders are characterized by a relationship with food in which eating and emotions are inherently linked, such as someone seeing eating as a reward for good behavior or restriction as a way to feel a sense of control

over the way their body looks. No matter what is happening in our lives, everyone deserves to be fed and nourished when our bodies tell us what they need.

Reflection: What has been your exposure to eating disorders? Why do you think these have become so common in our culture?

How are eating disorders portrayed online?

The internet has created a wide-open door to the world of eating disorders. A quick Google search will yield countless tweets, TikToks, and even whole social media accounts that detail weight-loss goals and methods that are just disordered eating, as well as tips for avoiding attention from concerned family and friends. “Thinspiration” or “thinspo” images of body types that people aspire to have—which range from slim to downright skeletal—are available in less than a second by searching hashtags like #ana (anorexia), #mia (bulimia), #thinspo, #thighgap, #bonespo (bone inspiration), and #EDfam on social networks (though many are now closely monitoring and trying to censor this type of content). However, specifically searching for these topics 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.

Online information about eating disorders isn’t always created by accident or unintentional unhealthiness either; there are many online communities specifically dedicated to helping people develop and maintain eating disorders. Two of the tags mentioned above, #ana and #mia (as well as #debbie or #deb for depression and #sue for suicide) have been used to slip past algorithms and give people “encouragement” to push through whatever “setbacks” or “temptations” they may be experiencing in achieving their ED goals. There are even entire sites listing rules and creeds for maintaining an eating disorder and messages written in “Ana’s” voice, most of which encourage people to continuously think of themselves as ugly, unloveable, and unworthy. “The Ten Commandments of Ana,” a common list used by people experiencing anorexia, is a heartbreaking blog of a young woman tracking her “weight loss journey” with long affirmations of self-hate to drive herself forward.

Reflection: What examples of unhealthy eating habits have you seen in culture recently? Do you remember seeing similar things as a teen?

Why are eating disorders on the rise?

It can be difficult for those of us who don't struggle with eating disorders to understand why someone might develop them, but it's important to learn how and why they arise so we can help our teens walk in health no matter what they're dealing with.

People have been surrounded by images of what a “perfect” body looks like since the invention of modern advertising. From 19th-century corsets that [displaced your organs](#) to achieve a tiny waist to celebrities [retouching their Instagram pictures](#) past the point of recognition, there has always been a picture of the ideal to hold in your mind and compare to your reflection in the mirror. This doesn't just apply to women either; even though Thor's abs require a [grueling dehydration routine](#) to look the way they do, the superhero physique is still presented as the standard of attractiveness for men. It would be one thing if these images weren't presented as something we should strive for, but they are. Models, celebrities, and advertisements tell us that these people are the pinnacle of human beauty, and because of that they are also happy, successful, popular, and wealthy. Young, impressionable minds (and even older ones too) learn from these messages to connect their physical appearance with their self-worth.

Social media arguably has an even deeper impact on young people. Thousands of gorgeous people can fill our screens without interruption, using increasingly subtle filters to garner millions of comments praising their beauty, quite literally demonstrating that being attractive and being liked are the same. In addition, the rapid speed at which trends on social media change is applied to our bodies as well; women who gained weight to fit the “[slim-thick](#)” look are faced with the resurgence of 1990s emaciated “heroin chic,” and now that everyone has lip filler, [celebrities are making sure](#) everyone knows it's not cool. With a constantly shifting to-do list of what we need to do to be beautiful always in our pockets, much of which has to do with how our bodies need to look, it can be easy to develop disordered eating habits just to try to keep up.

Family and peer relationships can also play major roles in whether or not someone develops an eating disorder. Bullying from friends about weight and body image is a well-known problem in our culture, especially among young women—the term “DUFF,” which stands for “dumb ugly fat friend” was the title of a [2015 movie](#), and singer Maddie Zahm went viral for her song “[Fat Funny Friend](#).” Probably most teenagers have a story or two about a time when other kids made them

feel bad about their bodies. But something that we might not think as much about is the influence that we as parents have on our children, and how our behavior could make them susceptible to developing an eating disorder—or, on the flip side, could immunize them against it.

[The Balance Eating Disorder Treatment Center](#) says,

Parental behavior also majorly impacts child behavioral development. When parents perpetuate their insecurities and fixations on food, body image, and weight-related issues, they teach their children to behave that same way. An example might be if a parent consistently models self-depreciation based on weight or body image. Children will only be led to think the same way about themselves... Perpetuation of a parent's internal insecurities proves to be a concerning risk factor for developing eating disorders in children.

Parents quite literally teach their children how to eat, and for them what kind of relationship they should have with their bodies. It's hard to face, but the issues we might have with our appearances directly impact them. Your children see us as the people they will turn into when they grow up, and if we model unhealthiness about our eating and appearance for them, that's what they will aim for. It's a heavy responsibility, but also an opportunity to plant seeds. Relationships, more than anything else, make us who we are.

Reflection: If your child were to build their eating habits around how you regard food, what would those habits be? How else do you think our culture portrays eating?

How does mental illness play into eating disorders?

Apart from the social factors that can make someone more likely to develop an eating disorder, there is also a unique kind of thinking that comes along with eating disorders, because [they are a type of mental illness](#). Like any mental illness, they change how someone perceives the world around them; in the same way, as someone with depression literally cannot see hope in their lives or a person with anxiety is unable to feel safe no matter what they do, people with eating disorders might know that their body is suffering, but they cannot perceive that reality and feel compelled to take part in their disorder to have a sense of control over themselves. This is true for people who know they have an eating disorder and are trying to find health, but many people with eating disorders don't view the unhealthy relationship with food and their bodies as a problem to fix; rather, they see it as a path to happiness and peace.

Like I said above, not having an eating disorder can make it hard to understand those who do. Trying to help someone with an eating disorder by telling them to “love themselves” or “accept who they are” just doesn't work, and can make someone struggling with one feel isolated. Someone with an eating disorder can look in the mirror and quite literally [not know what they look like](#)—something called “body dysmorphia” or “body distortion”—and so any encouragement for them to change isn't just challenging their behavior, it's challenging their reality. The *Austin Center for Eating Disorders* helped me tremendously with this resource, and they told me one story of a mom and daughter who both outlined what they saw when she stood in front of the mirror. Her mom was shocked at her drawing, saying it was twice the size and a different shape from her real body, but no matter how many times she looked at her mom's drawing, she couldn't see it in her reflection.

Many people with eating disorders [say that finding groups that support them](#) in their unhealthiness, rather than trying to help them, makes them feel that they finally have a place to belong. Because these communities are usually digital and often disguised with specific terms to avoid app guidelines, algorithms, and content filters, young people can find understanding and support from people who will only hurt them, isolating them more and more from those who love them and want them to be healthy. If a teen already feels misunderstood, these communities can latch onto the idea that people trying to help them are trying to stop them from losing weight and isolate them from their real-life relationships.

Eating disorders don't come out of thin air, but certain situations can specifically trigger someone to develop one. Many survivors of eating disorders can pinpoint the beginning of their troubles to a traumatic experience: bullying/ridicule, [sexual or emotional abuse](#), a breakup, their parents' divorce, the loss of a loved one, or 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. Many develop eating disorders not out of a desire to "get skinny," but to feel released from their pain. If you imagine a young person in the wake—or right in the middle of—a traumatic experience, desperate for a sense of control and an escape, and add in a culture that clearly states the equity of a "perfect" body and perfect peace, it's no wonder so many of our teens are experiencing disordered eating.

Reflection: Can you think of when you've struggled with body image? Did culture or family and peer relationships contribute to these feelings?

What insight does Scripture offer about eating disorders?

To be extremely clear: those who struggle with eating disorders are not suffering due to any moral failing or lack of faith. Even those who don't seek help or engage with communities that encourage their disorders are not demonstrating bad behavior, weakness, or rebellion against God. Eating disorders can't be wished away or done away with in a moment. Survivors of eating disorders are called that because many do not live through the things an eating disorder does to their body, and when someone begins to experiment with disordered eating they are trying to address their wounds, and they likely can't imagine that they could end up in rehab, or the hospital with ruptured organs or brain damage. We say this because it's all too easy to dismiss those with eating disorders or treat their behavior as an issue of sin that needs to be repented to make all their problems go away.

People develop eating disorders because they are hurting. Vulnerability and weakness are different things, and while pain doesn't make us weak, it does make us vulnerable. If someone is feeling alone, afraid, out of control, or experiencing self-hatred or self-harm, it isn't shocking that they would be more susceptible to something that makes them feel better. When Satan is described in **1 Peter 5:8** as "a roaring lion looking for someone to devour," the image is of a hunter circling a herd, singling out anyone who isn't safe in the heart of a group. Satan will use anything—an offhand comment, an advertisement, insecurity, feeling left out or different, trauma, stress, peer pressure, the things we see online—to separate us from safety, to make us vulnerable to his attack. His goal, as always, is to steal the abundant life Christ gives us. He does this by offering the very things we long for - a sense of control, acceptance, community, and escape from our pain.

The version of those things that can be experienced through eating disorders can't last, but when you're struggling with feelings of powerlessness and isolation or wrestling with trauma, it can be difficult to recognize that the fulfillment accomplished through unhealthy eating habits is not the real thing. Rather, a life lived in this way places inner feelings and outer appearances above the true, profound joy of the Lord and ultimately leaves a person feeling more empty, isolated, and broken than before.

Life in Christ offers us real acceptance and community, real freedom from pain, and the real safety and peace that our attempts at control can't give us. People struggling with eating disorders

need to know that there is someone who wants to give them these gifts, but it's hard to trust the gifts if you don't know the giver. In [Luke 5:31](#), Jesus refers to Himself as a physician. The word suggests expertise and knowledge, and His audience of sinners suggests a mission of mercy. Jesus wants to come right into the heart of our sickness, whether we're trying to get better or not, and restore us gently, and tenderly so that we can walk with Him into the peace we sought and couldn't find anywhere else.

Reflection: How can you lean into God when working through conversations with your child?
In what ways is the joy of the Lord exemplified in your life?

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

Some disorders have physical manifestations (someone with anorexia nervosa will probably experience extremely visible weight loss over time), but others aren't as obvious (someone with a binge eating disorder won't likely look different, but their psychological relationship with eating is destructive), so take some time to familiarize yourself with the [signs and symptoms of the different disorders](#). Monitoring online activities may also be revealing because a teen who feels isolated will likely look for help online—sometimes from a pro-eating disorder community, but more commonly in diet how-tos, quick weight-loss tips, apps that track nutrients, or questions about why they feel the way they do and how to stop.

The best way to know is to ask your teen, but carefully consider this option through prayer. On the one hand, it may help them break the isolation, secrecy, and shame if you offer them a loving and safe environment in which to admit their struggles. On the other hand, they may not be ready yet to confront the issue or admit there is a problem, so asking about the concern could be premature. A good way to split the difference might be to approach the issue from a distance, asking with graciousness and curiosity about how your teen sees body image issues represented online, or how their friends talk about them. Sometimes it's easier to talk about a big-picture problem than your issues, but it doesn't make those conversations any less revealing. In any case, drawing attention to your child's eating patterns, weight loss or gain, or the time they spend on their appearance in a way that makes them feel like they're under a spotlight is more likely to cause them to withdraw than open up, so always approach these conversations with sensitivity.

If you are concerned that your teen has an eating disorder, reach out to a professional who can walk through the process of how to get them evaluated and potentially diagnosed, as well as how to get your teen to the point of diagnosis if they are in danger but aren't willing to address it. If your teen doesn't have an eating disorder and is instead dealing with some eating patterns that haven't developed into a full disorder then it might still be helpful to encourage them to participate in therapy or at least be sure to have ongoing conversations about it. This can be difficult in and of itself and takes courage and patience to walk through, but knowing that your teen is not experiencing a fully developed eating disorder can give you wisdom on how to guide them to health.

If your child is diagnosed with an eating disorder, you must speak to an expert about how best to help them. As mental illnesses, eating disorders require specialized care from someone with expertise in treating them, be that a treatment center, a doctor, a nutritionist, a therapist, or some combination of the above. And, because eating disorders are not just a problem of behavior but often arise from trauma and can feel compulsory or necessary, simply confronting the unhealthy relationship with food or exercise may, at best, miss the point altogether—or, at worst, compound the underlying issues, further pushing your teen into destructive behaviors. Eating disorders can have real, long-lasting physical and psychological impacts, some of which can even result in death if not treated, so a young person with an eating disorder must be treated competently, compassionately, and quickly by a professional.

Often a teen with an eating disorder will not want to admit that they have a problem. Not unlike someone struggling with substance abuse—which has many symptoms in common with eating disorders—confronting the ways your relationship with food is hurting you includes trying to change, and if a teen is deep in an eating disorder then “change” sounds like “catastrophe.” Some teens may push back against any attempt to get them help, and this could potentially be a painful time in your parenting journey. God often expresses His healing through the gifting and skill of those who have studied to care for the human body and mind.

No matter who else walks with you on this journey with your teen, no one can replace you as their parent, so it’s also important to make sure that you are well-equipped to care for them well as they seek healing whether that’s from a diagnosed eating disorder or from the still-difficult patterns of unhealthy eating and body image it’s so easy to develop. Here are some key things we as parents can do for our teens to help them do that:

Pray. First and foremost, any teen struggling with something that disrupts their flourishing needs to be covered in prayer. Prayer is the most important work we as parents can do. Only God knows all the different facets of a person’s struggles, and only He is powerful enough and gentle enough to heal and restore them. If your teen is willing, pray with them, carrying their plight to God as Jesus carries our plights to the Father. If your teen isn’t interested in praying, continue to intercede on their behalf. God is our heavenly parent,

and so no one knows better what it is like to love a child in pain. He listens and empathizes with all we say, and He loves them even more than we do.

Create a safe environment. A huge component of eating disorders is feeling different, unaccepted, unsafe, and isolated. People suffering from eating disorders often feel shame, guilt, and self-hatred both when they do and when they don't act out of their disorder. Parents can fight this by making your home and your relationship with your children a safe place to talk through feelings, incidents, fears, insecurities, and relapses without fear of repercussions. Establish a no-shame ground rule, assuring your teen that they can tell you anything they need to, even if they think you don't want to hear it. Problems can't be solved in the dark. It's only in the light that we find freedom.

Examine your behavior. As I mentioned earlier on in this guide, teens often pick up unhealthy mentalities about their bodies and what they eat from their parents or another influential adult. If your home environment encourages disordered eating, that may be a big part of the problem. Take time to think about what you model to your child, and repent and ask God to forgive you for any unhealthy patterns. Repent to your child and ask them to forgive you as well. If your child observed disordered eating in someone else, open a discussion with your child about how this might have influenced them and whether it might be healing to talk to that person. It's also worth saying that disordered eating tends to be generational, so part of your conversation with your teen might involve discussing the ways you thought about eating when you were growing up, and even how your parents might have thought about it. This kind of generational conversation can go the other way too; if your teen (or, understandably, you) isn't comfortable with discussing mistakes you might have made as a parent yet, it can be fruitful to ask them about how they would parent their children in this area. This frames the conversation in a positive light and can help both of you brainstorm ways to create a healthy, loving environment around eating in your home.

Limit social media access. This is an area that requires great wisdom and insight. Especially if you have a younger child, restricting their device and internet time may be necessary to keep harmful influences at bay. Some children may not recognize that they need to establish limits for their mental health, and some haven't learned how much the images they absorb can affect them. For a teen who is struggling with an eating disorder, it's important to assess if and how social media and the internet have played into that, and [make a plan for how to keep them safe](#). If you do go this route, always explain why

you're setting certain boundaries—and keep the door open for discussion. Restrictions without explanations may be perceived as controlling and mean-spirited rather than loving and protective.

Ground yourself in 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 your child when they are struggling. If your child is not open to this, we still encourage you to do this for yourself so you can guide your prayers with Scripture. Never use the Bible to condemn your child or compound their shame and feelings of not being good enough. Instead, search through Scripture for words of life, light, and love from our God. They aren't hard to find. Google is your best friend! Also, I put together this "Faith Through the Word" document in an earlier OPM Email – check it out!

<https://stjohnneumann1.flocknote.com/note/24221963>

Reflection: If you parent a teen struggling with an eating disorder, what are some ways you've intentionally connected with them throughout their healing process? What are some specific things you have prayed for your child?

Bread of Life

It is meaningful when Jesus calls Himself a physician because He's revealing a part of His purpose, as well as a part of His character. That's why it's so powerful when Jesus calls Himself [the bread of life](#). The people to whom Jesus was speaking didn't have infinite options for where and what to eat, and "when," "how," and "if" might have been relevant questions about their food too. So what they heard when Jesus said "I am the bread of life" was that He was claiming to be essential and necessary. He was saying that coming to Him is a question of survival, not of taste.

I've said several times that it can be difficult to understand why someone would develop an eating disorder because, for many of us, our relationship with food is simple. We don't withhold food from ourselves as punishment or give it to ourselves as a reward. Probably, for most of us, we don't even think about food that much. When we are hungry, we eat. But how many of us can say the same of our relationship with the Bread of Life? Is it so hard to empathize with someone whose eating disorder is breaking them down when so often our spiritual lives look the same way?

If we don't know exactly who Jesus is and what He wants for us, we can slip into a relationship where we only come to Him when we feel like we have something to impress Him with, or when we've made a mistake and come groveling in shame. Sometimes we can get hung up on our sinfulness, repenting over and over even though He's said we're forgiven the moment we ask. Other times it feels easier to put Him on the back burner of our minds, putting off spending time with Him until we've earned it. None of these things are reflections of who Jesus is, but our distorted view of him can create a distorted relationship.

This is not to say that eating disorders and a broken relationship with Jesus are the same, but if we as parents can understand why our teens wrestle with the things they do, it can give us wisdom as we disciple them in the faith. It's easier to have grace and kindness for someone who wrestles with food, something that is supposed to give life and comfort and nourishment when we understand the ways we can wrestle with Jesus when He promises the same thing.

The other thing Jesus meant when He said he was the Bread of Life was that He came to meet and fill us in the first way we need it. He promises to make us co-heirs in His eternal kingdom, He fills us with power and might, and he uses the language of glory and royalty in much of what he says. But He also says He is our bread, come to end our hunger. He doesn't need us to be anything

other than what we are, even—and especially—if what we are is broken, lonely, needy, and small. He only asks us to come and eat.

Reflection Questions: What are ways you can practice coming to Jesus with your needs?
How can you model reliance on Jesus for your teens?



The Catholic Youth Community of St. John Neumann

