

**Family Influence on Eating Disorders**

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In today's society, eating disorders have been becoming common amongst plenty of adolescent girls. In 2007, a study followed four hundred and ninety-six adolescent American girls for eight years until they were twenty years old. Out of the four hundred and ninety-six adolescent American girls, the results found that five-point two percent of the girls followed either suffered from Bulimia, anorexia or binge eating disorders ("Statistic & Research on Eating Disorders," 2021). When the researchers had included the nonspecific eating disorder symptoms, thirteen-point two percent of girls had fallen under the category of suffering from an eating disorder ("Statistic & Research on Eating Disorders," 2021).

The Family dynamic can play a very influential role in child development. During child development, children spend most of their time around close relatives, making it easy for families to influence their children. Family dynamics can play a role in developing eating habits/ disorders during adolescent and developmental years. In this paper, there will be a discussion of the definition of an eating disorder and the top three eating disorders that people struggle with. Additionally, there will be a discussion about common characteristics found in people who suffer from these disorders. A discussion of the most common family dynamics with children who develop eating disorders will be explained, along with a description of the family setup. The discussion of body ideologies and bias views in a family setting will also be discussed and explained in this paper. This paper will discuss the topic of food being used as a substitution for parental absence. Three verses from the Bible will be included in this paper. An explanation for the verses and a comparison of what the Bible says about these eating disorders will be examined. The main goal of this paper is to shed light on the connection between how the family setting can influence children who develop an eating disorder.

Before connecting families and eating disorders, it is crucial to understand what an eating disorder is and the most common eating disorders. According to the National Council for Mental Wellbeing, an eating disorder can be described as a psychological disorder characterized as an abnormal eating habit, view on food, weight, or body shapes. Eating disorders affect at least 30 million people in the United States (Howard, 2018). The top three leading eating disorders that are most common are Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia Nervosa, and Binge Eating Disorder (Howard, 2018).

Anorexia Nervosa can be described as an eating disorder that troubles people with their weight and what they consume (“Anorexia Nervosa- Symptoms and causes,” 2018). The obsession with losing weight may lead to behaviors that involve dieting, fasting, and the use of medications like diuretics, enemas, and laxatives (Howard, 2018). The most common characteristic of Anorexia Nervosa is being underweight. Typically, people who suffer from Anorexia Nervosa maintain a BMI drastically below the national average for age and height (Howard, 2018). A common sign of Anorexia Nervosa is the person’s constant dissatisfaction when looking into the mirror (Howard, 2018). This dissatisfaction can lead to the need for the person to try to reach a goal of thinness that they may feel is self-worthy of the satisfaction they are craving. A common behavioral symptom related to Anorexia Nervosa is the restriction of food intake (“Anorexia Nervosa- Symptoms and causes,” 2018). This restriction can be accomplished through dieting, starvation, or fasting. People who suffer from this eating disorder believe that the easiest way to reach the goal weight they have in mind is by restricting any form of food that will make them gain weight or feel like they are gaining weight. This form of belief may lead to frequently missed meals throughout the day or refusal to eat despite enforcement from others.

The second most common eating disorder that people often suffer from is Bulimia Nervosa. Bulimia Nervosa is an eating disorder where one eats large amounts of food, also known as bingeing or purging, and then tries to get rid of as many calories as they can in very unhealthy ways (Mayo Clinic, 2018). The most common way people who suffer from Bulimia Nervosa get rid of their calories to prevent gaining weight is by forcefully vomiting before digesting the food. Other methods used to eliminate the calories are using laxatives, weight-loss supplements, diuretics, or enemas after binge-eating. Unlike Anorexia Nervosa, people who have Bulimia are usually slightly underweight, within normal range, or completely overweight (Howard, 2018). Some common signs and symptoms of people who suffer from Bulimia Nervosa are constant thoughts about weight and body image (Howard, 2018). Most of the time, the idea of gaining weight after a big purging session scares people in the direction of getting rid of the unwanted calories. Getting rid of the unwanted calories gives people an alternative method to not gaining weight, leading to repeated episodes of bingeing and purging in one sitting.

The third most common eating disorder that people suffer from is Binge-eating disorder. Binge-eating disorder is an eating disorder in which one frequently consumes a large amount of food and feels like they cannot stop eating throughout the day (Mayo Clinic, 2018). A common characteristic for people who suffer from Binge-eating disorders is the feeling of remorse or embarrassment after an episode of bingeing (Howard,2018). This feeling of embarrassment can take a toll on these people, which leads them to binge in secret away from family members, loved ones, and friends. Along with mood swings, another common characteristic for these people who suffer from binge-eating disorders is continuous weight gain (Howard 2018). Because they are unable to control their eating habits, it can turn into a situation of unhealthy weight gain.

Like the ones mentioned previously in this paper, eating disorders have been linked to particular family dynamics. Studies have shown that most families with children suffering from an eating disorder have similar traits in the household structure. One of the most common traits families with children that suffered from eating disorders had in common is that their household tended to have low emotional literacy (Jones, 2021). What this means is that families usually do not express emotions or talk about feelings. Most of the time, an eating disorder can be used as an emotional coping mechanism when people feel like they are helpless and have no one to talk to. When children feel like they are not comfortable enough to share their emotions with their parents, it can make them feel like they have to suffer through the pain they are experiencing all by themselves. This can make it easier for the child to fall into things that may not be beneficial for them in the long run, but it helps them cope with the pain they are feeling at the moment. An example of a harmful habit they may use to cope with would be an eating disorder.

In addition, another similar connection between families with children who suffer from an eating disorder are that they are in a household with conflict avoidance (Jones, 2021). This means that families would avoid the topic in challenging or controversial situations instead of discussing it as a family. Family dynamics like this are often referred to as “families that walk on eggshells” (Jones, 2018). When a family is experiencing hardship, it is important to discuss the conflict rather than avoid it. After a traumatic event, it has been proven that some healing can come from the situation if the victim has a family to fully support them through the hard times (Jones, 2021). When a child feels like they cannot consult with their parents or siblings about traumatic experiences, it makes them shut down and try to cope differently. Eating disorders are a common negative emotional coping mechanism that people use after traumatic events.

Like the families discussed previously, another common family dynamic linked to eating disorders is families with poor boundaries (Jones, 2021). When families struggle to set and maintain clear interpersonal boundaries with their children, it can be effortless for them to fall into things that can negatively impact their lives. When parents can set reasonable boundaries and rules while creating a safe space for their children to discuss complex topics, it can reduce the chances of emotional disconnection (Mousoulidou et al., 2020). Although it is good to set boundaries with children, overprotective parenting has also been linked to eating disorders (Mousoulidou et al., 2020). Out of two hundred and forty-five participants in the Mousoulidou et al. study, one hundred percent of them had reported that their relationship with their father or mother was categorized as overprotective. When parents become overbearing and overprotective, it can make a child feel like they have no sense of control over their lives and the things that they want for themselves. This mindset can be emotionally damaging to a child, which can lead them to fall into things that can negatively impact their lives. When a child feels like they have no control over their life, eating habits can be one of the only things they may feel like they can have a say in. This can lead to disorders like Binge-eating disorder or Anorexia Nervosa. To cope with the emotional damage and lack of privacy, children can run to things like binge eating disorders to fill the voidance.

In addition, families that prefer the authoritarian style have also been linked to children developing eating disorders (Jones, 2021). When parents demand strict discipline and respect, it can make it difficult for the child to feel like they have the freedom to do or say things without receiving punishment. This can affect the child and often make them feel like they are trapped in a place where they cannot express themselves without getting in trouble. This negative dynamic

can affect a child emotionally, leading them to fall into things that may not be good for them at all.

It has been proven that family dynamics that tend to be more chaotic and out of control have been linked to the development of eating disorders (Jones, 2021). Usually, these families include parents with no control over their child's actions. When the parents have low authority and cannot seem to control their child, it can become easier for them to be introduced to things that can lead them in the wrong direction. Things like eating disorders can influence children during the adolescent years and significantly impact the child's eating habits (Jones,2021).

One family dynamic linked to most children with eating disorders is families who take pride in a societal image (Romito, 2019). These families can also be described as the "Picture Perfect family." When families put pressure on their children to focus on striving to be the best and only gaining high achievements, this can take a toll on the child's healthy mentally (Romito, 2019). Romito's study showed that adolescents who developed eating disorders were also connected to their parent's dissatisfaction (Romito,2019). Most of the time, it is natural for children to want to gain satisfaction from their parents. When a child sees that they have not met the satisfaction and achievements that their parents have set for them, it can make them feel like they have failed in a particular aspect of life (Romito, 2019). Most of the time, these children tend to strive to reach the achievement their parents solely wish for despite the negative habits they may pick up along the way to reach this goal. It can be easy for these children to skip meals once in a while, but as time progresses, meal skipping eventually becomes more frequent, and most of the time, it can turn into a habit (Romito, 2019). Another aspect of the "picture-perfect family" is those that care about appearance (Romito,2019). Sometimes, these parents usually take pride in the compliments from others about their child's appearance, making them feel like

they need to maintain the standards that have been put in place (Romito,2019). This type of pressure takes a mental and emotional toll on a child because it makes them feel like they need to maintain their appearance for their parents and societal acceptance (Romito, 2019). Eating disorders come into play with these adolescent girls most of the time because they may feel like it is the only way to maintain their appearance and the standard they are held to.

Often parents' comments and views can take a toll on how children view their body image. Most of the time, families that emphasize thinness and appearance are at a higher risk of their child practicing unhealthy eating patterns (Mousoulidou et al., 2020). Most of the time, it can be expected for a child to value their parent's opinion, wanting to meet the standards that have been set for them. Occasionally, children may develop unhealthy eating habits to reach this goal set for them in hopes of gaining the satisfaction they desire from their parents. Harsh words and criticisms in a family setting may also put the child at risk of developing an eating disorder. In Ralmaho's research study about eating disorders in adolescent girls, a participant who suffered from Anorexia Nervosa for many years had stated that "If I eat alone, I feel good because nobody watches me, but when I am with my parents, I don't feel good anymore because they watch and judge me." The pressure set on the child when a parent watches and criticizes what they eat can take a significant toll on their mental health, which can lead to eating disorders. When parents criticize their children about what they eat and how many times they eat, this can negatively affect the child because it makes them feel like they should eat less, eat when they are not around, or eat nothing at all. This ideology can lead to detrimentally eating habits because the child may connect a negative view with eating mainly because of their parent's criticism and views on what they are eating.

In some cases, food can be viewed as a coping method due to parental absence. When children are put in stressful situations, they may pick up certain habits to cope with the stressful circumstances they are in. When parents go through a divorce, it can take a toll on the child's mental health due to the fact that their family is splitting up. In Ralmaho's research study on eating disorders in adolescent girls, there was a pattern with eating disorders in girls whose parents had divorced. Most of the time, these difficult situations would make them lose their appetite, which eventually turned into a habit that was hard for them to quit (Ramalho et al., 2021). Sometimes, this situation would lead to binge eating disorders mainly because the food appeared to compensate for the difficult situation that they were going through. In cases like parental death, food appeared to compensate for the parent's absence. In Ramalho's research study, a participant who suffered from Bulimia Nervosa stated, "The amount increase. Before I ate a little, I ate normally. Now I wake up at 3 am, and I have the urge to eat, and I do eat." When a child goes through a traumatizing situation like losing a parent, it can make a huge shift in their life. Different habits may help the child with coping with the loss they are going through. During this traumatic time for them, eating habits may become to change, whether by skipping meals or using food to cope with the traumatic situation (Ramalho et al., 2019).

Certain views on the body and how to treat it has been discussed multiple times in the Bible. 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, which says, "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So, glorify God in your body." To God, the body is a temple which he took his time to create. The Lord's creation should be taken care of and nourished because temples have value and were created to be maintained and represent the image he created. Another bible verse that discusses the importance of keeping up with the Lord's creation is Romans 14: 7-8, which says,

“For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.” In this life, nothing on this earth is important when living life for the Lord. No hardship, pain, or hurt should ever influence how someone views their body image if they do not focus on earthy things and live their lives for the Lord. Another bible verse that discusses the topic of body ideology is Psalm 139:14, which says, “I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well.” The Lord does not make any mistakes when he makes his creation. No matter how someone looks, this is the way the Lord has made them, and in his eyes, his creation is beautiful and fearfully and wonderfully made (What does the Bible say about eating disorders?, 2021).

Eating disorders are something that can harm a child. When a child is put in a hostile family dynamic and environment, it can lead to falling into habits that may be hard to break in the future. Body ideologies and enforcement in a family dynamic can make it difficult for the child, leading to unhealthy eating patterns. Food can also be used as a coping mechanism with parental absence or death. In the end, family dynamics can play a significant role in developing eating habits/disorders during adolescence and developmental years.

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