

## **Counseling as if a Life Depended On it: Counselees with Anorexia**

### I. Introduction

A. There are two emergencies: the physical life-threatening emergency and the spiritual eternal-soul threatening emergency.

B. For this workshop:

1. Define anorexia and give a few basic facts
2. Physical symptoms, danger points, doctor's involvement
3. Data gathering questions
4. Give hope
5. Important agenda items: vanity, gentle and quiet spirit, perfectionism, and a high view of God.
6. Emphasize how to help your counselee face reality and restructure, by God's grace, her thoughts and eating.
7. Homework

### II. Definition and Basic Facts

A. **Anorexia:** Anorexia is an eating disorder characterized by markedly reduced appetite or total aversion to food. It is a condition that goes well beyond out-of-control dieting... The individual continues the endless cycle of restrictive eating, often to a point close to starvation. This becomes an obsession and is similar to an addiction to a drug. Anorexia can be life-threatening.<sup>1</sup>

#### B. Statistics

- 20% will die
- Costs for treatment center range around \$1200./day
- 85% are diagnosed before age 20
- In the United States, one in twenty are anorexic
- Only 10-15% are males
- The death rate of anorexics is 12 times higher than the death rate of all causes of female deaths in the 15-24 year old age range.

### III. Physical Symptoms, danger points and doctor's involvement, family involvement

A. Physical symptoms: trouble thinking, sad, moody, irritable, bad memory, fainting, decreased blood pressure, heart rate, palpitations, heart failure, anemia, weak muscles, swollen joints, fracture,

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<sup>1</sup> [www.MedicineNet.com](http://www.MedicineNet.com), definition of anorexia

- osteoporosis, kidney failure, kidney stones, decreased potassium and sodium, constipation, bloating, period stops, bruise easily, dry skin.
- B. Danger points and Doctor's involvement: an anorexic counselee *must* have a complete physical and active doctor's involvement. Normally, I am in touch with her doctor (with her permission). If she would not give me permission, then I would not counsel her. It is too dangerous to risk her not being closely monitored by a physician. Typically, I would require her to weigh in at the doctor's office once per week. [Some counselors think it best to not let the counselee know how much she weighs. I don't agree as I think knowing her weight is part of facing reality.]
- C. Family involvement: this is critical and normally I would require at least one family member to be present at each counseling session. Normally, it would be the girl's Mother. That way, the family member could hear what I say to the counselee and the Scriptures would give her hope and confidence, too.
- D. Almost always, I begin with seeing the counselee twice a week for several weeks and now that we have a counseling training center, I have one of the other counselor's also in there.

#### IV. Data Gathering Questions

- A. Ashley is a typical teen growing up in a Christian home and struggling with anorexia. She has to come home from her first year at college because she became physically unable to continue due to self-starvation.

#### B. Typical Data Gathering questions

Counselor's Questions	Ashley's Answers
"Tell me about your relationship with the Lord."	"I asked Jesus into my heart when I was eight years old. Now I am not sure that I am a Christian. I used to read my Bible and pray but have not done so in several months. I want to be a Christian but now I'm really confused. I do go to church with my family when I am home from school. I grew up in church."
"Do you think you are a perfectionist?"	"Well, my family and friends think so but I am not sure. I think I just want to do my best, which is a good thing."
"Tell me how much you weighed and what went through your mind when you started on your diet."	"I was a senior in high school and I realized I was fat. I weighed 135 pounds and I'm only 5'3" tall. I just wanted to lose about twenty pounds and be little like my best girl- friend. I did a lot of research on the computer and found out how to eat healthy. I worked really hard at dieting and exercising. I got a lot of compliments at first, so over time I doubled my efforts."
"Do you have 'rules' about what you absolutely will not eat?" Give me some examples of your 'rules.'	"Yes, but they are all based on healthy eating. I do not eat any sugar or fat or bread, no red meat, only lean chicken and fish. No starchy vegetables such as potatoes. I will eat some fruit and non-fat yogurt."

“How is your relationship with your parents?”	“It used to be good, but now they harass me all the time about what I eat. I tell them if they will just leave me alone, I will be fine.”
“How much do you exercise each day?”	“Usually I fast walk or jog about 45 minutes each day. Then I try to do 30 minutes of aerobic exercise and stomach crunches. Right now it is difficult for me as I don’t have much energy, but I try.”
“What do you think would happen if you ate what your Mom wanted you to eat?”	“I’d be fat and I have worked too hard to get the weight off. I’m not going back there!”
“How did you learn what is healthy to eat and what is not?”	“From doing research on the computer.” Mom added, “She has spent countless hours researching on the computer.”
“Have you thought about suicide? If so, how would you do it?”	“I have at times wished I were dead, but I have never thought how I would accomplish that. I would never do that.”

## V. Giving Hope, boatloads of hope! [your counselee and you will need it]

### A. Counselor encouragement:

1. “I know this is difficult, but this is not insurmountable. With God’s help, there is no reason that you not only will overcome this but will also have a joy and gratitude in what you eat.”
2. “The bad news is that this is sin, but the good news is that it is *just* sin, and therefore, can be repented of.”
3. “Ashley, I know you must be afraid that I am going to make you eat so much that you become fat. The truth is that God doesn’t want you to be fat either. Instead, he wants you to have self-control, joy in what you eat, and to glorify Him in the process.”
4. “Because I know this is going to be scary, we are going to go slowly. One of the things you will learn is how to *not* “...lean on your own understanding” but to trust God and those whom God has given you to help you” (Pro. 3:6).

### B. Specific Scriptures to read, explain, and assign for meditation/memorization: Lamentation 3:21-25; Romans 8:28-30; 1 Corinthians 10:13.

## VI. Important Agenda Items

[Keep in mind that what you teach in the beginning may need to be revisited as most counselees with anorexia will not be able to think clearly at the beginning.]

### A. The Gospel.

- Even if they profess to be a believer, revisit the gospel thoroughly – Stuart Scott’s power point presentation of the gospel [www.scottresourcesforhim.com] or Martha’s “Salvation Work Sheets” [free download on [www.marthapeace.com](http://www.marthapeace.com)]

B. The “Big Picture”

1. Turn to Christ for help and comfort. Heb. 4:14-16; 1 Peter 5:6-7; Matthew 11:28-30

2. Two most important commandments: Matt.22:34-40

C. The doctrine of Sanctification [Martha Peace lecture may obtain from Sound Word Associates]

D. Vanity – either teach the biblical principles to your counselee or have her read and answer the questions in the Vanity chapter in *Damsels in Distress* by Martha Peace.

E. Gentle and Quiet Spirit

1. Definition: Accepts God’s dealings with her as good, not given to anger or fear.

2. Biblical principles homework/assessment questions and Scriptures. [may obtain Martha’s lecture from “Sound Word Associates” and the handout from Martha at [marthapeace@mindspring.com](mailto:marthapeace@mindspring.com).]

F. Perfectionism

1. I recommend Amy Baker’s material.

G. High and accurate view of God.

1. I have seen God use A.W. Pink’s book *The Attributes of God* in amazing ways.

2. Usually I wait a few weeks before starting a counselee on Pink’s book because it takes a while for them to begin getting enough nourishment to their brains to process the information and begin to have an accurate view of God. The brain has to have carbohydrates to function.

VII. Help her face reality and renew her mind, by God’s grace, her thoughts and her eating. [Her sinful, obsessive thoughts needed to be replaced by loving God and others’ thoughts.]

A. Self-Talk Log

Sinful, Obsessive Thoughts	Loving God and Others Thoughts
“Everyone is watching me! Why can’t they leave me alone!”	“Everyone is <i>not</i> watching me, and those that are, love me very much. I don’t blame them for being worried.”
“If I eat what my Mother cooked, I will be fat!”	“If I gratefully eat what my Mother cooked, I will show love to my Mother by “... not [being] selfish,” and show trust to God by “...not rely[ing] on [my] own understanding.” (1 Cor13:5 and Prov 3:5, adaptations added)
“There is nothing wrong with wanting to be healthy.”	“There <i>is</i> nothing wrong with wanting to be healthy, but according to my doctor, my eating habits are not healthy. I have to relearn

	what is healthy.
“This makes me so angry!”	“Thank you Lord for this trial, that I am still alive, and that You have sent my family and my counselor to help me.” (1 Thes. 5:18)
“I hate being home!”	“”It is God’s special blessing to me that I can be home and receive the help that I so desperately need. I am glad I am home.”
“I don’t feel like eating!”	I will eat whether I feel like it or not and if I have to gain weight, I will just have to gain weight. I am going to honor the Lord. He will help me. “...whether [I] eat or drink, or whatever [I] do, [I am to do] everything for the glory of God.” (1 Cor 10:31, adaptation added)
“I will not eat gravy on my rice. It is unhealthy and will make me fat!”	“The truth is that my mom’s gravy is not unhealthy for me as I do not have a health problem with cholesterol. It is God’s will for me that I gain weight. Thank you Lord for this gravy. I will eat it now.”(1 Thess 5:18)
“That serving of ice cream is 160 calories. Tomorrow morning I will skip breakfast but write down on the food diary that I did eat breakfast.	“Lord, forgive me for plotting to do evil. By your grace tomorrow morning, I will not only eat breakfast but I will also be grateful for it.”(1John1:9)
“Mother made a chicken casserole. I cannot eat it because I do not know what ingredients she put in it.”	“Love is not selfish. This is a way I can show love to my Mom by graciously eating what she has prepared.” (1 Cor 13:5)
“Any sugar, no matter what, is really bad for you. It is going to make me sick.”	“Nonsense. We have freedom in the Lord to eat sugar as long as we are not gluttonous. Thank you, Lord, for sugar!” (Cols.3:15)
“There is no way I am going to eat that meatloaf. It’s fatty and red meat. Everyone knows that it is unhealthy. I can’t believe my Mother would do this to me!”	“Reality is that because I am healthy and do not have hyper-cholesterol disease, I can eat a normal portion of meatloaf. It’s OK. The world tells us ‘Don’t handle, don’t taste, don’t touch. Scripture tells us to enjoy the freedoms that we have in the Lord and that God has declared even meatloaf good! Even Peter had to be reminded of that when God gave him the dream on the rooftop.” (Acts 10:9-16)
“I am going to eat some of the biscuit so they won’t be on my case. But I will exercise secretly for twenty minutes tonight to make up for it.”	“God forbid that I will plot evil in my heart. I am going to eat all of the biscuit and thank my mother and the Lord for it!”

### B. Parent’s questions:

1. “What should we do if she just sits and stares at her food?” Answer: remain calm, talk to her very calmly and give her hope. Say something like, “I know this is very hard for you but the Lord will help you, and I want you to pick up your fork and take a bite of potatoes. Ask the Lord to help you. We are going to pray for you right now and then we are going to continue to eat our meal.” Then turn the focus of dinner conversation to something else.

2. “What if we think our daughter is not doing well physically?” at any time, you may certainly call 911 or her doctor. Pray for wisdom but it would be better to be “safe than sorry.”

### VIII. Homework

- A. Doctor’s appointment.
- B. Ask the doctor for a normal weight range for the counselee based on age and height.
- C. Assign a food diary with a minimum number of calories – better to start low and gradually work up or else your counselee will truly panic. Diet to include a balance of carbohydrates, fats, and proteins. May need to ask the doctor for a balanced diet or send her to a nutritionist specialist.
- D. Self-talk log when she feels anxious or frustrated.
- E. May have to have the counselee stop exercising or seriously cut back. Be very specific in finding out how much she is exercising.
- F. Daily Bible Reading – assign specific Scriptures. May have to read out loud, several times if has trouble concentrating.
- G. “Think These Thoughts” journal – she should write in her journal specific Scriptures that encourage her, quotes she likes, or thoughts in her own words that are “true, God-honoring, and right” thoughts.
- H. Memory work: 1 Cor.10:31; Hebs. 4:14-16
- I. Specific homework from agenda items.

### IX. Conclusion

- A. Counseling an anorexic must be taken very seriously as it truly is “Counseling as if a Life depended on it!”
- B. You must be steadfast and cling to an absolute trust in God and in His Word.
- C. Keep in mind the “big picture” items such as the gospel and “loving God and loving others”, but do not neglect the specific “put-on’s.” The “put-on’s” will bring the dross to the surface.
- D. Specific homework and self-talk logs are going to help you really know what is in your counselee’s heart. Then, biblically they can begin to renew their minds instead of continually obsess with what they eat.