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DISCIPLING WOMEN

BY LORI JOINER

EATING DISORDERS

Filled with personal stories, humorous examples and helpful advice, *Discipling Women* will guide you in how to invest spiritually in other women. Whether you are reaching out to a new Christian, a neighbor, or in full time vocational ministry, *Discipling Women* gives the answers, lift, and encouragement you need.

Discipling Women will assist you as you navigate through sensitive areas with your disciple, areas like lesbianism, sexual abuse, and depression. In this chapter Lori tackles the difficult issue of eating disorders.



DISCIPLING WOMEN



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Eating Disorders: “If I eat this, it will make me fat...”

“I remember the first day I threw up,” Allison told me. “I was on a Girl Scout camping trip and felt I had eaten too much. Just that week I had watched a Baywatch episode where the star of the show, played by Pamela Anderson, was being confronted with her eating disorder. There was a detailed scene showing her character throwing up her food by sticking her fingers down her throat. So I excused myself to the bathroom and tried to do what I had just seen on television — throw up by putting my fingers down my throat. It worked, and so began my six-year battle with bulimia.

“In high school, I began to date Justin. ‘Awful’ is the only way to describe him accurately. He wanted me to be super-skinny and encouraged me to do anything to stay thin, even if it meant throwing up my food. He would say things like, ‘You are so beautiful and skinny.’ Struggling with low self-esteem, I did my best to please him and stay thin by continually throwing

up my food. It became more than just something I did every once in a while; I was now bingeing and purging three or four times a day.”

Upon returning from a date, Allison would grab an entire box of Raisin Bran and milk. “Any food taken with milk or Coke would always make the throwing-up part a lot easier,” Allison continued. “I would binge on Raisin Bran, milk, and Coke, and then purge it after every date I went on. I just couldn’t cope with how he treated me. I felt used and worthless, and bingeing was my solace. Each morning when I woke up, I hated myself. I hated myself for throwing up, I hated that I did not feel like I could stop bingeing, and I hated having a boyfriend who only liked me if I was skinny. And to make matters worse, any food I was tempted to eat, I thought to myself, ‘If I eat this, it will make me fat.’”

Allison had become accustomed to her dry mouth, aching throat, and what she calls “chipmunk cheeks.” “My face and cheeks were so swollen from the trauma of throwing up all day that it literally looked like I had something stuck in my cheeks,” she said. “Even now, I cannot look at pictures from those years. It’s just too painful.”

When Allison’s hair began falling out in chunks, she realized the extent of her addiction. She approached her mom with the news of her problem, and her mom responded simply, “Just don’t do that.” Allison was reaching out for help, but still felt stuck. No longer trying to hide her secret, she would walk into a bathroom, even with three other girls in the next room, and purge her entire dinner.

There are many reasons women struggle with eating disorders, including a need for control, a distorted body image, media propaganda and fear. Eating disorders are complex. The roots of these issues often have nothing to do with food at all. If someone you disciple has an eating disorder,

this chapter will help you understand the warning signs, the different types of disorders, and how to walk through the healing process.

Referring to a Professional Counselor

The rest of this chapter will give you helpful information I have compiled about this issue through the years. Be assured that 99.9 percent of us are not equipped to fully help a woman with a history of eating disorders. At any moment feel free to say to her, "I really want to help you and I don't have the resources you need. I think you need to see someone who specializes in this area, so I would love to help connect you with a professional counselor and continue to walk through this with you."

So as you read, take note of information and testimonies you think could help your disciple, but don't feel pressured to become her counselor. Just continue to pray for her, spend time with her, help her grow spiritually, and encourage her to be an overcomer.

Red Flags

There are numerous types of eating disorders: compulsive overeating, exercise addiction, anorexia, bulimia, and any mix of these together. Here I will cover some of the warning signs for three of the more common eating disorders.

Anorexia nervosa is essentially self-starvation. An anorexic will do her best to go long periods of time without eating. This disorder is characterized by:

- * Preoccupation with food, calories, nutrition, and cooking

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- * Denial of hunger
- * Excessive exercise
- * Frequent weighing
- * Loss of menstrual cycle
- * Claiming to feel “fat” when in reality she isn’t
- * Dieting with zeal when not overweight
- * Odd combinations of food
- * Intermittent episodes of “binge” eating

Bulimia nervosa means eating or overeating (bingeing), then throwing up (purging) afterward. Symptoms include:

- * Excessive concern about weight
- * Strict dieting followed by eating binges
- * Frequent overeating, especially when distressed
- * Expressing guilt or shame about eating, feeling out of control, depressive moods
- * Use of laxatives and/or vomiting to control weight
- * Leaving for the bathroom after meals (secretive vomiting)
- * Planning binges or opportunities to binge
- * Fear of eating in front of people

Binge-eating disorder (compulsive overeating) is eating when not hungry, or continual eating without regard to physiological cues. It is often mistakenly considered to be less serious than

other disorders and therefore often undiagnosed. Here are some symptoms:

- * Frequently eating to the point of extreme discomfort and pain
- * Bingeing to reduce anxiety or deal with emotional problems
- * Preoccupation with body image
- * Eating in secret, such as in the car or in the middle of the night
- * Inability to stop or control eating once a binge ritual has begun
- * Compulsive behaviors, inflexibility, and excess in life in general
- * Total preoccupation with food

Note: Not all people with binge-eating disorder are overweight, and not all overeaters are binge eaters.

Bringing Up the Subject

Your disciple may tell you she is struggling in this area and needs help. Or you may need to initiate the conversation yourself after seeing some of the aforementioned red flags. I can say without a doubt that this is one of the hardest things for me to do. I always have to overcome fear that I might offend the person when my heart is to help them. Here is a personal experience of how I brought this subject up with Tina, a woman I was discipling.

A few years ago, I began to suspect that Tina was struggling with an eating disorder. I noticed that in social eating scenes, she would put a ton of food on her plate, only to eat a few bites, excuse herself, and dump the plate of food down the sink and say, "I'm full." In one instance I became aware that she had only eaten a can of tuna and dry lettuce all

day. She was already very thin and had low self-esteem. She walked and exercised constantly.

I did not know what to do. I was afraid to bring it up, thinking that if I was wrong, I would really offend her. Time after time, though, she would not eat, and she was becoming dangerously thin. I prayed fervently that God would help me initiate the conversation, that He would prepare her heart to talk about this, and that ultimately He would heal her and set her free.

“Tina,” I said during our regular discipleship time one afternoon, “I don’t really know how to bring this up. I don’t want to hurt you. But because I care for you, I am going to bring this up, and trust God with the outcome. I have noticed that some of your eating behaviors don’t seem normal.” I then explained to her the observations I had made, and then said, “Are you having some trouble in this area? Are your eating patterns as bizarre as I have noticed? Or is what I am saying coming out of left field?”

Tina’s eyes began to well up with tears. She nodded her head yes, and there began a long process of healing from her addiction to this disorder. As with most eating disorders, Tina had some family dynamic issues that manifested in her strict control of food. When Tina was growing up, she was not allowed to be herself. She was not allowed to express herself or allow her own personality to develop. For example, her mom made her wear very frilly dresses, style her hair a certain way, and even enter beauty pageants. It was as if Tina’s mom was living her life through Tina. She exerted a severe control over who Tina was, prohibiting Tina from being herself.

Knowing Tina now, I can’t imagine her in beauty pageants or wearing frilly dresses. She is very natural, wears little makeup, and loves to shop

at hip thrift stores. Tina is beautiful and soft-spoken, and hates to be in front of people. One way she found she could express herself was through food and how much she did or did not eat. This was one area in her life that Tina could control. And this habit she had formed to find some semblance of control was now controlling her.

Understanding the Extent

When talking about eating issues with your disciple, one way to fully understand the extent of her problem is to ask a few questions. Here is a list I have compiled and used throughout the years. After you have talked about your concerns, you could introduce this by saying, "I want to understand the extent of what is going on in your life so I can fully grasp your struggle and get you the help you need. In order for me to do that, how would you feel about me asking you a few questions?" Feel free to bring this list with you:

1. Do you have regular periods? Skip periods?
2. Do you fear getting fat?
3. How often do you count calories/fat grams?
4. How often and how long do you exercise?
5. Do you "punishment-eat" (for example, deny yourself dinner because you ate a large lunch, or punish yourself for eating seconds by restricting food at the next meal)?
6. Have you talked with anyone about this before? If yes, what was done?
7. When did this start? How old were you?

8. Why did this start?
9. Have you ever thrown up your food? How often?
10. Do you purposely skip meals when hungry? Go a day without eating? Longer?
11. What do you believe some of the root causes are?
12. What is the longest you have gone without eating?
13. Do you eat in the middle of the night?
14. Do you tend to eat in secret?

As you ask these questions and learn more about the extent, you will be better able to help your disciple. These questions will also help you possibly narrow down the exact type of eating disorder she has. She may be just on the outskirts of an eating disorder, and your relationship with her will provide the love, support, and accountability she needs. If her patterns are deep, long, and life-threatening, she will most likely need to see a professional counselor for more in-depth treatment, as I mentioned before.

Root Issues

Getting at the root of an eating disorder is paramount for complete recovery. Your disciple, in her own strength, may be able to eat normally for a while, but it will only be a matter of time before the unresolved root issue resurfaces again. Listed below are some common root issues in this area, as well as the understanding that your disciple will eventually need to come to for lasting recovery.

Your disciple will need to:

- * Understand that her eating disorder is not about food or fat
- * Understand that her eating disorder is a coping mechanism to deal with pain
- * Heal from trauma, sexual abuse, and other painful experiences in her past
- * Face fears of being unacceptable and unloved, and find better ways to deal with those fears than through perfectionism
- * Develop a healthy self-esteem and reject self-hatred and self-loathing
- * Resolve her issues with food, health, and nutrition so she can live
- * Want to live and be alive
- * Resolve body-image issues and stop determining self-worth by size and shape
- * Give herself permission to feel and eat, and to ask for and receive help
- * Trust herself and others, rather than demand to be in control
- * Forgive herself

Most of this portion was adapted from information gathered at CenterforChange.com.

Turning Points

Each woman or friend I have known through the years who has struggled with an eating disorder has shared with me her “turning point” — a

thought, realization, or Scripture verse that helped her truly begin to seek the Lord for help battling the disorder. I wanted to include them, as you may find one that may be particularly helpful in your disciple's specific situation.

Sin

Referring back to the story that opened this chapter, when Allison was confronted with the fact that bingeing and purging was a sin, she was shocked. She knew it was not something she should be doing, but did not necessarily consider it a sin. Nevertheless, it is. God has given us an "earth-suit," on loan, to be able to do His will and fulfill His purpose for our lives. When we starve ourselves, purge our food, or overeat, we are treating our earth-suits contrary to what they were designed to do. That is sin. Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit and should be treated with care. As Romans 12:1 reminds us, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship" (NIV).

Our bodies are not our own. We are to present them to God in worship, as vessels for Him to use to touch people for His kingdom. When we give Him our bodies, healthy and ready for service unto Him, that is an act of worship: "Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness" (Romans 6:13, NIV).

Allison said that she would talk to God about her bingeing and purging, and even begged God to let her do it because it was the only way she thought she could stay thin. She was scared to trust God with her weight. She felt certain that if she trusted God and stopped throwing

up her food, He would make her fat. After years of repeatedly trying to stop, giving in, and feeling guilty, Allison finally took a shaky step of trust and gave it to God: “I told the Lord I would rather be fat and walk with Him than be thin and not walk with Him.”

Eternal Perspective

One day, as a friend and I were talking about eating disorders, I casually commented, “It’s sad that a woman who has an eating disorder will spend years of her life obsessed with every calorie, hiding a secret sin of bulimia, anorexia, etc., all to shed the body and spend eternity in heaven. It’s like all her time went to something that is not eternal, something that won’t last past her brief time on earth.” My friend later told me that was a huge eye-opener for her regarding her own eating issues. Psalm 39:4-5 reminds us, “Show me, O Lord, my life’s end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting is my life. You have made my days a mere handbreadth; the span of my years is as nothing before you. Each man’s life is but a breath” (NIV).

In the grand scheme of things, we don’t have a whole lot of time on earth. I once heard it said that if you add up all the days of time, our lives would seem like a mere weekend in comparison. We need to help our disciples invest their “weekend” in something that will last. Their soul, their relationship with God, and the souls of others — these things will last, not our bodies, which will ultimately perish.

Leaning on God

Another turning point for many women is the reminder that they are not alone in the healing process. Remind your disciple that she has God’s

strength to help her overcome the temptation of bingeing, purging, and starving. The Holy Spirit dwells within us, and we can ask Him for help, guidance, and strength in the face of temptation. As Psalm 46:1 tells us, “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble” (NIV).

As difficult as it may seem to reject the temptation to overeat or binge, God will help us. He will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we are able to endure: “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it” (1 Corinthians 10:13, NIV).

Bigger Purpose

Remind your disciple of the truth of God’s Word: We are His workmanship and we are delightfully made. We have a destiny to fulfill, and our bodies, eyes, voice, and personality have been fashioned by God to help us achieve that. We can trust God with this area of our lives; He is trustworthy and cares for us more than we could ever comprehend: “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10, NIV).

Idolatry

Tina would lie awake at night thinking about her body and weight. She would calculate everything she had eaten that day and determine what had been good and what had been bad. If she had eaten too much at any one meal, that was bad, and she would scold herself. If she had curbed hunger pains by only drinking water, then that was good. Before falling asleep she would mentally go through everything she would allow

herself to eat the next day, and she would drift asleep only after she was convinced she had a game plan she could follow.

In the morning, she would shower and spend a long time in front of the mirror. She would look at every square inch of her body, berating herself for areas she felt were intolerably fat. She would then give herself a pep talk regarding what she was and was not going to allow herself to eat that day. She would make deals with herself and impose consequences if she failed to follow through on her extremely low-calorie diet.

All throughout the day, Tina's mind focused on what she had just eaten, whether it had been good or bad, what she was going to eat, how to deal with her constant hunger pains, new ways to get thin, and a constant fear of being fat. All of Tina's attention and energy was focused on herself. She was her own idol.

In the Old Testament, the people of God made and worshipped a golden calf, as well as other man-made objects. They put these idols before God, at times even in the place of God: "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God..." (Exodus 20:4, NIV).

God forbids us to worship other idols. He is a jealous God and desires, even demands, to hold first place in our lives. An idol is anything we put before God.

Some women put their boyfriends before God. All their time and thoughts are spent on these men. God is pushed to the side, receiving only the leftovers of their emotional energy and time. Some women put their careers before God. Their long hours may make church or time with the Lord a mere afterthought. Other women put entertainment

before the Lord. In truth, anything taken out of its healthy function and abused may become an idol, whether it take the form of exercise, shopping, food, or even our very own bodies! We need to be very careful not to make an idol out of anything or anyone.

Tina told me her turning point came not only when she faced her own pain and family issues, but also when she realized the idol she had made of herself. She wanted to focus on her relationship with God and her growing walk with Him, rather than on her own body. She wanted to be a God-worshipper and not a self-worshipper.

A Tale of Two Hearts

As I have discipled women who struggle in this area, I have found two types of hearts. The first is a teachable heart. This woman needs someone to reach out to her, help her, and convince her that she doesn't have to do this to herself. She needs someone to walk through this with her, pray for her, and help her get to the root of her pain. Allison was this type of woman. She had been so hurt by her boyfriend's comments about her body that she needed someone to come alongside her and say, "You're beautiful, and you don't have to be dangerously thin to be beautiful." She wanted help. She wanted to replace the lies with truth, but was unsure where to start.

The other type of woman does not have a teachable heart. You can lovingly share with her your observations about her destructive eating behaviors, and she will flatly deny them. Or she will admit to having an eating disorder, but will not want to change. She may even claim that she is going to change, but in truth has no such intention. In cases such as these, she either wants to continue her established eating habits,

which she believes give her control and allows her to be thin, or she is unready to face the painful root issues driving her disorder.

Allison said that she did not have a teachable heart for the first four years of her struggle with bulimia. She had decided that she was going to be thin no matter what, and would not have listened to anybody's advice on the issue. Later, when she realized the extent of her terrible habit, Allison wanted to change. At this point, however, she felt trapped and addicted to the behavior. It was only after all this that her heart slowly became more teachable, and she began to reach out for help.

If you are unsure which type of heart your disciple has, I would encourage you to ask her. Ask if she is ready and willing to begin to heal. You might say to her, "I want to help you with this. I know there are root issues that tend to manifest themselves in eating habits. I am not an expert, but would love to help. Are you willing to trust God with this area of your life and begin to seek Him for help to end this eating disorder?"

Watch Your Language

It is important that we disciplers set a good example in this area by eating normally and expressing a healthy self-image. If I embraced every fad diet, proclaimed certain foods to be "good" or "bad," swore off sweets, and talked non-stop about how "fat" I felt, I believe I could short-circuit my ability to help the women in my life who really do have serious issues with food. They might even think, "If Lori thinks she's fat, I wonder what she thinks about me..."

I ran a ministry home for four years. During that time I had an average of eight girls living with me each year. One of the primary ways I ministered to them was to model a life of exercising regularly, eating

normally (three meals a day, plus snacks), and enjoying desserts. A number of these women had struggled with eating issues such as bulimia and compulsive overeating. Observing me accept my body, trust that the Lord designed me uniquely, and eat and exercise regularly helped them perhaps more than any of the Bible studies I ever taught.

All that to say: if you feel like you need to lose weight, do so in a healthy way by eating in moderation and exercising regularly. The only way to truly lose weight and keep it off is through a lifestyle change, not fad diets and quick fixes. Accept your body and reject negative thoughts about yourself that are not coming from God. He loves you. When you are a strong model in this area and can fully accept yourself and embrace a good self-esteem, you will set your disciple up for victory when it comes to eating and food issues.

Helpful Hints

Hold Thoughts Captive

If your disciple is bombarded with negative thoughts, teach her to treat them as lustful or mean thoughts and reject them! They are not from the Lord, and are likely a spiritual attack from Satan. He is a liar who desires us to believe the opposite of what the Lord thinks of us. Satan knows the Lord loves, accepts, and delights in us, and therefore he hurls painful thoughts at us like, “You are fat; God will make you fat; if you eat, you will lose control; being thin is your only hope for happiness.”

Does that sound like something God would say? Of course not. Therefore, encourage your disciple to reject such thoughts. We have the ability, and moreover the right, as children of God to replace these lies with

scriptural truth. Spend some time with your disciple discussing the thoughts that come into her mind throughout the day related to food, body image, and God. Study God's Word together, looking for Scriptures that combat the negative thoughts. I have included a few to get you started:

When you begin to think, "If you eat this you will be fat," replace it with "So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18, NIV).

If you find yourself thinking, "You cannot help overeating; it is just who you are," dwell instead on "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17, NIV).

Accountability

Share your thoughts, emotions, and eating patterns with your disciple and encourage her to talk about hers. Don't be afraid to ask her difficult questions such as, "What did you eat today? Did you get to spend time with God? If not, was it because you worked out instead? Has your body told you it was hungry, and are you denying it?"

If your disciple legitimately needs to lose weight, why not do it together? You can share goals, struggles, and accountability questions to ask each other on a regular basis, to help both of you reach your goals in a healthy way. You can spend time together praying, exercising and cooking meals. As Ecclesiastes 4:9,10 shows us, "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down,

his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up” (NIV).

Accountability will be extremely helpful when your disciple is tempted to purge her food or not eat despite being legitimately hungry, because she knows you will ask her about it. When she embraces lies instead of believing the truth about herself and her self-worth, you can be there to help her and remind her of her great worth in God.

Limit the Scale

Many women live in bondage to the numbers displayed on their bathroom scale. When a woman steps onto her scale and sees a number that is even a half-pound over what she believes to be acceptable, it can send panic to her mind and cast a shadow on her entire day. I used to do this before I realized that most women will fluctuate a bit in weight during the month and that life was too short to feel bad about half a pound. If you notice that the bathroom scale becomes a hindrance in your disciple’s struggle with weight, you might suggest that she consider giving it to a friend and only weigh herself once a week or once a month.

Extra Help for the Binge Eater

Holly lived her entire life by a strict set of rules: “I can only eat pizza on Fridays, I cannot eat fat, if I wake up late I still have to bike and run, I will let myself wear that only if I barely eat today, I will only eat vegetables, I will only, I will only, I will only...” And on it went. Her strict control of food led to episodes of binge eating and incredible feelings of self-hate and guilt. At one point she had restricted her calories so severely that she lost her period for almost a year. “Lord,” Holly prayed,

"If you let me have my period back I promise to eat some fat." Struggling with an intense obsession with food, calories, and exercise, Holly's binge eating addiction controlled her for much of her life. She was never told she looked too thin. Most considered Holly to be healthy, self-controlled, and athletic. Sadly, they had no idea of the constant struggle going on inside her mind.

If your disciple is struggling with a binge-eating disorder, she might benefit greatly by meeting with others who share similar problems, since women with this addiction tend to isolate themselves and hide their behaviors. Indeed, any woman with an eating disorder is encouraged to get additional help in the path toward complete healing and victory, whether through books, self-help groups, a Christian counselor, or on-line resources. Also, you might suggest to your disciple who binge-eats in the car to consider taking a different route home, one where she will not be confronted by the temptation of fast-food restaurant chains, or bringing a passenger along for the ride. She should also be encouraged not to bring home unhealthy snacks or "trigger foods."

Aim at the Heart

Remember it's about the heart. Try to aim at the heart and your disciple's continued deepening in her relationship with Jesus. It's not just about behavioral modifications, where she drives, not using the scale, or counting calories. It's about her heart relying on God and yielding to Him in every situation. It's about falling in love with Jesus and facing the struggle in the power of the Holy Spirit, and walking with God day by day, moment by moment.

Additional Help

This chapter only begins to uncover some of the many issues involved with eating disorders. I hope it's given you a place to begin walking with your disciple toward complete victory in this area of her life. If you need additional help, please utilize some of the resources I have included. As I have mentioned before, if your disciple is struggling with an eating disorder, the root often has nothing to do with food at all, and professional help should be sought sooner than later for real help and lasting healing.

Program Information/Contact Information

Remuda Programs, 888-724-0802 or www.remudaranch.com

Eating Disorder Resource Catalogue, 800-756-7533 or www.bulimia.com

Celebrate Recovery Materials and Small Groups,
www.celebraterecovery.com

The Lord's Table (Bible study and online accountability for overeaters),
www.SettingCaptivesFree.com

Helpful Books

Do You Think I'm Beautiful? Angela Thomas

Loving Your Body, Deborah Newman

Holy Hunger, Margaret Bullitt Jones

Hunger Pains: The Modern Woman's Tragic Quest for Thinness, Mary Pipher, Ph.D.

Diary of an Eating Disorder, Chelsea Browning Smith

Starving for Attention, Cherry Boone O’Neill

Body Betrayed, Kathryn Zarbe, M.D.

When Your Child Has an Eating Disorder: A Step-by-Step Workbook for Parents and Caregivers, Abigail H. Natenshon

In Summary

It has been said that women think about food and their weight as much as men think about sex — meaning we think about it all the time! Many women, due to a variety of factors, have embraced destructive and dangerous eating behaviors to achieve thinness. As disciplers, we can be loving guides in their lives by helping them replace lies about their body with the truth of God’s Word, uncover the root of their eating habits, and ultimately gain victory over negative eating patterns.

What is thrilling is that each woman mentioned in this chapter —Allison, Tina, and Holly— have gained healing in this area of life. That does not mean they are perfect. They still report times of intense temptation and consistently have to replace lies with the truth of God’s Word. The best part, though, is that each of these women currently disciple other women, helping them walk out of their own eating disorders.