

JACK'S CORNER

QUESTION: My 13-year-old daughter is over-weight. I know she has poor eating habits, but I think there is something more going on. Can you give me some possibilities?

ANSWER: There are genetic, physiological/hormonal, and nutritional factors which you should discuss with your doctor and nutritionist. I will not speak to these factors here.

You know your daughter well. If your "gut" tells you that there is something more, moms are usually right. **Often, food is used to soothe hurts of the heart.** The feeling of "fullness" is far more than simply a full stomach. It becomes a way of self-protection to relieve feelings of "woundedness" and disappointment. This **need for relief** becomes extremely attractive and eventually habitual. Food is an easy, legal, and available solution to the emptiness felt by many adolescent girls. **Watch how your daughter uses food.** Does she eat when something hurtful has happened? Does she eat because she doesn't have a social life with her peers? Does she talk about dieting, but doesn't seem to have the strength of will? Does she use her size as an excuse? Is she often lonely and melancholy? If you answer "yes" to any of these questions, your gut is right.

Understand that your daughter has tremendous ambivalence toward food and her weight....**food is both the friend and the enemy.** On the one hand, she enjoys the soothing effect of eating. On the other hand, she knows that her appearance isolates her. There is the hurt of isolation, but there is also the safety of being over-weight. It is easier to blame the rejection and hurts of life on her weight than to confront what might happen if she were not over-weight. With the hurt of isolation comes the desire for soothing, and hence, more eating. This cycle can be hard to break. Depression often becomes a part of this downward spiral. Educate yourself in the area of eating disorders and watch for warning signs of depression and suicide. Both you and your husband should get involved with your daughter now. Be compassionate and candid about your concerns. Model for her healthy eating habits. Are you over-weight? Diet with her. **Formulate a plan with her and your doctor.**

A parent does not have to think very hard to realize how a weight issue can overflow into the spiritual realm. In our "appearance is everything" society, it is hard for over-weight adolescents to truly believe they are loved by God. **It is hard for them to place their wounds and longings in His hands.** They often believe they are unlovable and undesirable....ultimately unforgivable. Deep, personal relationships are feared. Self-protection becomes god. Involvement with others is superficial at best. In addition to professional medical help, your family may need a professional "spiritual" counselor to help you understand these behaviors and **use this struggle as an opportunity to grow in your relationship with Christ!** You will have to interview potential counselors to see if they are capable and interested in guiding your family in this direction.

Jack Lipski, M.A.
SOTHCS Counselor
(Permission granted to copy for personal use only.)