INSIGHT INTO
EATING DISORDERS

Helena Wilkinson
The Waverley Abbey Insight Series has been developed in response to the great need to help people understand and face some key issues that many of us struggle with today. CWR’s ministry spans teaching, training and publishing, and this series draws on all of these areas of ministry.

Sourced from material first presented over Insight Days by CWR at their base, Waverley Abbey House, presenters and authors have worked in close co-operation to bring this series together, offering clear insight, teaching and help on a broad range of subjects and issues. Bringing biblical understanding and godly insight, these books are written both for those who help others and those who face these issues themselves.
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FOREWORD

My personal and painful family experiences of eating disorders have convinced me of the need for clear understanding of, and help and teaching on, all aspects involved – including the spiritual dimension.

In this book, Helena Wilkinson brings together a breadth of theoretical knowledge, with a clear personal understanding of the experiential realities of the disabling power of eating disorders and a biblical view of the enabling power of God which can and does enable people to overcome them.

For our God-given life (physical, mental and spiritual) to be healthy, we need to take in the correct food to satisfy the hunger of our body and mind. But there is another hunger which we need to satisfy, a spiritual hunger, a hunger of the soul. Well-balanced and nutritious eating habits, physical, mental and spiritual, are therefore essential for healthy living. Eating disorders destroy this balance and can take the sufferer into a world of physical, psychological and spiritual disorder.

Helena’s knowledge of this difficult subject, together with her compassion for sufferers, have nurtured the words penned within this book. They offer the reader a simple yet edifying insight into understanding, helping and working with people who have an eating disorder.

The work is skilfully reasoned, bringing a welcome and much-needed insight into the traumatic and often fatal world of eating disorders. This insight and her analysis of the subject make this book an excellent starting point for people who are seeking a biblical understanding of these extremely complex and often life-threatening conditions.
This work is therefore a fitting introduction for professional counsellors, therapists, pastoral workers, students and those who have an interest in, or want an understanding of, the subject. It also offers practical help for people who suffer with an eating disorder, or their families and friends.

Helena deals with the psychopathology of eating disorders, backing this with good research data and biblical validation. She fearlessly acknowledges the need of a heavenly Father who gave His Son in order that we might have abundant life. In this book, Helena emphasises the vital connection between the physical, psychological and spiritual dimensions of people, in relationship to eating disorders.

This book is a must for people with an eating disorder as it gives excellent practical and biblical helps, information and guidance. It would also be my desire to see people inspired to work with those who are suffering with eating disorders. Helena’s work is an encouragement for prayer, and a motivation for further study and research into the spiritual dimension of dealing with precious souls who need the love, compassion and understanding of skilled clinicians, pastors and friends.

Dr Ralph J.C. Harkness
INTRODUCTION

In 1989 I was a student on the first Diploma course (One Year Institute in Christian Counselling) at Waverley Abbey House, and had the privilege of sitting under the devotional and counselling teaching of Selwyn Hughes and others. Towards the end of my counselling training Selwyn asked if I would consider joining the staff. For nearly four years I worked in both the editorial and counselling departments of CWR. It was during this time that I saw the birth of the Insight Days, including a day on eating disorders which, at times, I led.

When it was mentioned that a book on eating disorders should accompany the Insight Day, and form a part of a series of books, I thought it would be an excellent resource. People often find it beneficial following a teaching day to have material that can be further studied at home. Whilst I have written other books on eating disorders and related subjects, the advantage of *Insight into Eating Disorders* is that it is written in such a way as to follow the format of the Insight Day. I hope that it proves to be a support to many.

I first became involved in working with eating disorder sufferers some twenty years ago following the publication of *Puppet on a String*, my own story of suffering and recovery from anorexia. As I have walked the road with many sufferers and their families I have learned to see the world through their eyes, but not be drawn into what many describe as a hopeless situation. I have cried and rejoiced with sufferers. I have seen the terrible pain of a parent losing the life of a child due to an eating disorder; heard many a tragic story of why the eating disorder was developed; celebrated with those who were told they would never have a baby only to be
proved wrong, and those who thought they would never recover and have!

My walk with others has involved female and male sufferers, children and adults (though for simplification I refer to the sufferer as ‘she’ in the book). I have seen young and old, one sibling and two, parent and child all caught in the throes of an eating disorder. Equally I have been aware of the vast array of people involved in a supportive role: parent, spouse, sibling, friend, counsellor, minister, GP, psychiatrist, CPN, etc. To all, I would say that I believe recovery is possible and I hope that the words of this book enable the process to become more possible. May the following scriptures be a comfort to you throughout the journey:

◆ ‘… I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands …’ (Isa. 49:15–16)
◆ ‘If you are attacked and knocked down, you will know that there is someone who will lift you up again …’ (Job 22:29, TLB)
◆ ‘Do not be afraid – I will save you. I have called you by name – you are mine.’ (Isa. 43:1, GNB)
◆ ‘… but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you …’ (Isa. 54:8)
◆ ‘The mountains and hills may crumble, but my love for you will never end …’ (Isa. 54:10, GNB)

Helena Wilkinson
Gower, Swansea, 2006
ACTIVITY UNDER THE SURFACE

‘An eating disorder is like an iceberg,’ I casually said one day, whilst talking with a group of eating disorder sufferers attending a course I was running.

‘What do you mean?’ someone piped up, apparently concerned that I might be inferring that eating disorder sufferers are hard and cold! I explained that with icebergs the part that is above the water surface, and visible to all, is small in comparison to that which lies, ominously, below the water’s surface.

In fact, only about one ninth of the total mass of an iceberg projects above the water. There’s not only a lot more under the water’s surface than is obvious to the eye, but there has also been activity below the water for some time prior to the iceberg being noticed. Glaciers form on land due to an accumulation of snow
over thousands of years and they ‘creep’ outward under their own weight. When the edge of a glacier advances into the ocean, some of the pieces break off and these are what we call icebergs.1 In the same way, with an eating disorder, ‘activity’ under the surface and pain ‘creeping’ out forms what we see as an eating disorder.

**JEMMA’S STORY**

For Jemma, the tip of the iceberg was the overwhelming fear of being anywhere near a normal body weight, and the delight she took in feeling physically empty. Whilst others couldn’t fail to see the massive iceberg in the middle of the ocean, Jemma couldn’t keep her head above the water long enough to accept the obstruction it was causing; instead she was slowly being drowned by that which kept her submerged in the darkness below.

She was the older of two girls and always felt inferior to her sister. Her mum was very anxious and her dad was unemotional. She’d had a rough start in life, being born prematurely and being separated from the loving touch of her mother, so vital to a newborn baby. Her parents’ relationship was not a happy one and Jemma often felt ‘piggy in the middle’. The atmosphere at home was tense. Whilst still very young she was sexually abused by a close relative, which continued into her teens. At school, due to severe dyslexia and lack of adequate help, she was constantly told that she was ‘sloppy’.

By her mid teens, Jemma was suffering from severe depression. She started to cut back on her eating and found that it made her feel in control when all else in her life controlled her. ‘For a while things were better,’ explained Jemma, ‘then I started a summer job and was sexually assaulted. Something inside me snapped and I just wanted to disappear. It was then that the anorexia