

## Self-Destructive Behavior

People cause intentional harm to their bodies in various ways. Those with eating disorders malnourish themselves. Some repeatedly vomit. There are people who cut themselves with a knife, and others who attempt suicide. How is it possible to help people with problems such as these?

### ***Why It Is Wrong to Destroy Your Body***

Begin by establishing the fact that it is wrong to destroy our bodies. That may sound obvious, but it is important that we show people from Scripture (above and beyond basic common sense) why it is wrong.

The most common answer is to simply say that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19); therefore, you should not harm it. For some reason this verse is usually thought to apply to smoking and perhaps alcohol or drug use, but not to missionaries who go where there are terrible diseases and poor health conditions or restless natives with spears.

The conclusion Scripture draws from the fact that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit has to do with spiritual things, not physical things. It's not that "your body is the temple; therefore, do not do any physical harm to it"; it's that "your body is the temple; therefore, do not *defile* it with sexual sin."

It would be difficult to find many people in the Bible who put their bodies in harm's way more than Paul, the writer of this verse. So the argument that he was referring to physical harm does not hold up.

Why is it wrong to do harm to your body? No particular passage of Scripture directly answers that question, so this is what I would say: It is not always wrong to do harm to your body. It is only wrong to do *so much* harm that you violate other biblical principles, such as the principles of stewardship or servanthood.

### ***The Stewardship Principle***

In Luke 19 Jesus told a parable about a nobleman who, before leaving to be appointed king, entrusted a sum of money to his servants and said, "Put this to work until I come back."

The parable was about Jesus. He is the King, you and I are the servants. He has given you a wide variety of resources—including your body—and he expects you to put it to work until He comes back (see Luke 19:12-13).

**1 Corinthians 6:20** You are not your own, you were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your body.

Everything, including your body, belongs to your Owner, the Lord Jesus Christ. You are only a steward of your body as well as everything else He has entrusted to you.

You will be rewarded or punished according to what use you made of the body entrusted to your care. If you abuse it or fail to take care of it so that it becomes an ineffective tool for God's work, that is poor stewardship.

## *The Servanthood Principle*

My role as a Christian is to be a servant. I am here to serve others.

MATTHEW 20:28 ... the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve....

Jesus was a servant, and He lived that way as an example for us (John 13:15). If I do so much harm to my body that I cannot serve, I have failed in my responsibility to be a servant.

God expects me to take care of my family. But if I do something that will most likely cause me to die early, I leave them without a provider.

God expects me to help those in need. But if I become so rundown, so obese, or so weak that I cannot help anyone do anything, I am not a very profitable servant.

If something beyond my control inhibits my ability to serve, that is not my responsibility. But if I intentionally do something that will make me unable to effectively serve others, I have become a useless servant.

## ***Attitudes behind Self-Destructive Behaviors***

The attitudes behind self-destructive behaviors can be sinful, or at least incorrect.

### **Self-loathing**

Remember in chapter 4 it was stated that when you counsel people, you should ask about the thoughts going through their mind leading up to the sinful behavior? The last time I counseled someone in the habit of cutting herself, I did that. This was her response:

You asked about the thoughts leading up to, during, and after [cutting]. Usually it is fueled by anger toward self. Maybe it is anger at someone else and then directed at self, but somehow it all comes back to self. Guilt, shame, anger, and a huge sense of neediness and emptiness all combine to create such a state of distress that it feels like something has to be done about it.

The inner attitude that drives this kind of behavior is something most of us struggle with. Usually it is not carried to the extreme of self-mutilation, but if I were to ask any group of people how many of them experience problems related to self-loathing, there would be quite a few.

I have a particular sin in my life; I try to get rid of it, but again and again I fail. Finally I have some support, I am making some changes, I am doing better ... but then I fail again. I fall back into sin and am so disgusted with myself, I feel like garbage.

The same thing happens with people who have been abused. Even if they did nothing wrong and were simply the object of someone else's sin, it is still common for them to experience guilt and self-loathing.

Self-loathing is tricky, because I can rationalize it to seem like a godly response to sin. What do you tell someone who may be thinking, *God has given me the grace to resist this temptation, but I have chosen to sin again anyway. Doesn't the Bible call me to have sorrow and grief over that? Isn't it natural to be disgusted with myself when I sin?*

The answer is yes, sin should cause disgust, sorrow, and grief. But obsessively dwelling on it is going beyond the proper biblical response.

The world looks at the problem of self-loathing and thinks the solution is self-love and self-esteem. But self-love and self-esteem will not solve the problem; in fact, more self-love will make the problem even worse.

To tell someone “You just need to think about how wonderful you are” is superficial. That will not help anything. The truth is, a person who is committing terrible sins is not wonderful.

What would a worldly counselor say? “Compared to most people you *are* wonderful. Everyone fails; everyone makes mistakes. But compared with other people, you do very well in many areas.”

That is the “head in the sand” approach to solving the problem. When someone becomes emotionally crippled because of sin and reacts in unbiblical ways such as self-destruction, obsessive thinking, prolonged depression, etc., that person’s problem is not a lack of self-love. *The problem is an inability to recover from failure.*

Self-destructive behavior often amounts to self-punishment for failure. The person fixates on his failure, and it dominates his thoughts and emotions to the extent that he feels something must be done.

When counseling anyone in this type of downward spiral, there is no need to deny the failure or to deny the seriousness of the failure. There is, rather, the need to teach the person biblical principles on how to recover from failure.

### **HOW TO RECOVER FROM FAILURE**

#### **Accept forgiveness**

1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Many people have a hard time accepting God’s forgiveness because that requires humility.

When we hurt someone, we always want to do something to make up for the wrong we did—which is good. But in some cases we cannot do anything to make up for the wrong, and in those cases we are reduced to simply begging forgiveness. That is our condition before God. We can do nothing whatsoever to make up for our sins, and our only recourse is to beg for forgiveness in complete humility.

Proud people cannot accept forgiveness, because to do so they have to admit not only their sin but also their helplessness.

What do you tell someone who says, “Okay, I realize my problem is that I am not accepting God’s forgiveness, but how do I do it? What do I have to do to accept His forgiveness?”

Urge that person to look into the Word and study the sacrifice Jesus made for his sin, so he can be convinced that Jesus’ payment was adequate. When a person will not forgive himself for something, it is because he does not truly believe Jesus’ payment for that sin was sufficient; he feels that he somehow needs to add to what Jesus paid.

Hebrews 10:1719 [says the Lord,] “Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more.” And where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin. Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus ...

If God has forgiven our sin, no further sacrifice is necessary. It is impossible to have higher standards than God, and it is impossible to be holier than God. But that is what a

person is trying to do when he wants to add additional punishment for his sin beyond what Jesus has already paid.

In John 13 Jesus was making a point about the fact that unless a person is washed by Christ, he cannot be saved.

JOHN 13:910 “Then, Lord,” Simon Peter replied, “[wash] not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!” Jesus answered, “A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean....”

If the person you are counseling is a believer, he has been cleansed “by the washing of regeneration” (see Titus 3:56 NASB), and he is clean.

ACTS 10:15 “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”

### **Set your mind on things above**

Look at your situation from a biblical point of view. What does the Bible say about God’s attitude toward a repentant sinner? Jesus told a threepart parable, recorded in Luke 15, that answers this question in a dramatic way.

He said, “What happens when a woman finds her lost coin that she has turned the house inside out looking for? She rejoices!”

“What happens when a shepherd finds one stray lost sheep? He rejoices!”

“What happens when one of a man’s sons takes off and plunges into a profligate, sinful lifestyle, but then comes to his senses and returns in repentance? The father throws a huge party, runs out to meet him, and before the son can even speak, wraps his arms around him and rejoices!”

That is God’s attitude toward us when we repent of our sin. He loves repentant sinners. He loves the contrite.

Isaiah 57:15 For this is what the high and lofty One says—he who lives forever, whose name is holy: “I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.”

Make sure that the person you counsel has a proper understanding of God’s attitude toward him and his failures.

### ***Realize the situation can be redeemed***

God never throws up His hands and says, “This person’s life is a hopeless mess. I think I’ll turn my attention to helping someone else.” Any situation can be redeemed. God can restore anyone from any fall. Just knowing that can help a person persevere.

One reason Tiger Woods is regarded as a great golfer is because of his resilience. Like every golfer, sometimes he will have a terrible hole, or two or three terrible holes in a row. When that happens, however, most golfers mentally check out of the game with the attitude, *It’s no use; my score is shot now*, and just hack their way through the rest of the round.

But Tiger Woods has an amazing mental toughness. He will have a couple disastrous holes but come right back and play so well from then on that he still ends up winning.

Understanding the importance of resilience has helped me, even in my golfing. Simply by maintaining a good attitude and not giving up, I have found that I bounce back much better now after a bad hole. And if this principle is helpful in golf—a game that’s practically meaningless—how much more important is it in spiritual matters of eternal significance?

Everyone fails. The critical question is not whether you will fail, how many times you will fail, or how big your failures will be; it is how well will you recover. And a large part of recovery depends on your level of faith in God's ability to restore you.

### **Develop a willingness to suffer**

It may seem strange, but if you think about it, people who are struggling with self-destructive behavior are experiencing a significant kind of suffering—the suffering of knowing they are not as good as they wish they were.

It hurts to admit to being sinful or capable of doing terrible things. Usually, in our pride, we deny the behavior and think, *I'm not the kind of person who would normally do that*. But if we do it enough times we finally have to admit, *Yes, it's true; I am the kind of person who would do that*.

The fact is, we are often shoved around by the flesh. “[T]he spirit is willing but the flesh is weak” (see Matt. 26:41 NASB), and we are not as good as we long to be. It is all part of the suffering of this life.

Instead of thinking, *I am an impeccable Christian and this failure is beyond explanation*, a person should think, *I am not as great a Christian as I thought. I am weak in this area, but I have great hope for growth*.

If I continually fail in a particular area of the Christian life, that means I have not yet mastered the biblical principles that would help me change in that area. But if God can save sinners, He can certainly sanctify carnal Christians.

When someone is depressed because he considers himself a failure as a Christian, the solution is not to convince him he is a super-Christian who is not vulnerable to the flesh. The solution is to offer the sure hope that Scripture gives for sanctification.

Romans 8:28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

Remind the person that as a believer it is his destiny to become more and more like Christ. That happens through a gradual process in this life.

2 Corinthians 3:18 And we ... are being transformed into his likeness with everincreasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

The solution is not deceiving himself into believing he is something he is not. The solution is in knowing that God is in the process of making him into something that, as of yet, he is not.

### **Don't universalize the problem**

On the one hand we need to admit our sinfulness and accept the suffering that comes along with it as being something we simply have to deal with in this life. But on the other hand we must not get carried away when we talk about our sinfulness.

Being weak in one area does not mean that I am weak in every area. Help a person who is struggling in one area learn to become thankful to God for the sanctification He has brought about in other areas. If someone disparages those things, he is slandering God and demeaning His work.

I might be lacking in the area of self-control, but that does not diminish the work of the Holy Spirit within me in other areas, such as compassion or zeal for His name. If God is

painting a masterpiece and I call it garbage, isn't it a slap in His face? Isn't it also gross ingratitude? Christians who belittle themselves lack gratitude.

Paul, encouraging the readers to live godly lives, says this:

**COLOSSIANS 1:10** 14 And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Your life should be an exercise in joyfully expressing your gratitude for the fact that God has declared you to be righteous and is making you more and more righteous every day. He has so transformed you that as a result of His grace you are now *qualified* to share in the inheritance of the saints!

If God has given me a passion for winning the lost, studying His Word, or helping the poor, but I become frustrated over some failure in another area and say, "I'm a wretch; I'm probably not even saved. There's nothing good about my life"—isn't that gross ingratitude and disregard for the righteousness God has graciously given me in other areas?

**1 CORINTHIANS 4:7** What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?

The righteousness we have has been given to us, and we should be grateful.

### *Self-Esteem Is Not the Answer!*

The world of psychology says, "You have a problem with self-loathing? The answer must be more self-love and pride." That approach is tragic, because it takes the person in the opposite direction he needs to go, and prevents progress at every juncture:

- A self-destructive person needs to accept forgiveness, which requires humility. More pride will make accepting forgiveness impossible. Convincing him that he is really a good person will make him think he does not even need forgiveness.
- He needs to set his mind on things above and take joy in the fact that God esteems the contrite and lowly. But if you puff him up with self-love, he will not be among the lowly—he will be among the proud, whom God opposes (see James 5:5).
- He needs to realize the situation can be redeemed by God. But if he is filled with self-love, he will think he can redeem the situation himself.
- He needs to develop a willingness to suffer, but that is the last thing people who love themselves will agree to. Escaping from suffering or eliminating it is top priority for them.
- He needs to avoid universalizing the problem, and he needs to be grateful for the righteousness he has been given. But pride and a focus on self destroy gratitude. A prideful person will never admit to being a carnal Christian in need of sanctification. Pride does not think it has been given anything. Pride is not grateful. And self-love causes people to be so obsessed with thinking about the pain of their failure that they blow it way out of proportion.

The solution to self-loathing is humility, not pride.

### *Specific Problems*

**Cutting and self-mutilation**

Remember the woman who was asked to share her thoughts leading up to this behavior? (The first part of her response began on page 127.) Here's the rest of what she had to say:

For some it is a way of trying to change the emotional distress into physical distress—something you can see, something you can control, something you deserve, maybe even something that can show others how you feel, though most cutters are very secretive.

There are also those who cut because they feel dead, almost like they don't exist. Pain makes them feel more alive.

For many, the pain of cutting is not very great, and some might not even feel it. For me, I felt the pain of it, but right afterward I didn't feel any pain at all (pain causes endorphins to be released, so maybe that has something to do with the "high" associated with cutting).

I usually felt a sense of satisfaction and greater control over my emotions after having done it. I also found that it dulled my emotions overall. After I stopped I seemed to become much more emotional in general, with regard to both happiness and sadness. I would say that cutting is a quick fix that doesn't last. It stifles the possibility of seeking real healing, it suppresses emotional pain, and it is addictive.

When you counsel someone who cuts or mutilates her body, help her learn a more godly way of expressing emotions. When someone has an emotional problem you don't have, the temptation is to say, "Why don't you just get over it?" Obviously, if she were able to do that, she wouldn't need your counsel. These problems are real and very difficult to overcome. Doggedly determining to try harder is not enough. There have to be significant changes in the thought life.

#### **Anorexia, bulimia, and overeating**

Anorexia is the problem of people—usually women—who starve themselves in order to be thin. No matter how thin they become, they feel fat and want to be thinner.

Bulimia is the problem of binge eating followed by purging. People will eat massive amounts of food in one sitting and then eliminate it by means of vomiting or laxatives, or both.

Overeating does not require a definition; most of us have firsthand knowledge of it. The reference here is to people who may not binge but who regularly eat more than they need, and thus they keep gaining weight.

All of these problems generally have several other emotional components.

For anorexics:

- false standards of beauty
- unbiblical attitudes toward food
- obsession with physical appearance
- elevating the ability to control body size to the level of an idol

For bulimics and other overeaters:

- idolatry of pleasure
- lack of self-control
- unbiblical response to failure

One thing they all have in common is an obsession with food.

As always, your goal is first to discover at what point the person's thinking has departed from the right path. Then work to correct her thinking. Spend time taking her

through the principles in chapter 5 on the disciplined thought life and chapter 6 on addiction.

Note that when you refer to the problem, it is best to refer to it as a food obsession rather than an eating disorder. Calling it an eating disorder makes it sound like some sort of disease or defect in brain function, and that can be discouraging.

She does not have a disease, she does not have a defective brain, she does not have a mental disorder—she has simply gotten into a habit of being obsessed with food.

### **Suicide**

There are two kinds of suicide attempts: those that are unlikely to work, and those that are likely to work.

Generally speaking, women attempt suicide much more often than men, but have a very low “success” rate. Men tend to choose more violent means, and it more often results in death.

All you can do with those who threaten suicide is to offer them hope and remind them of the dangers awaiting them on the other side of the grave. If a person has threatened suicide, he is most likely in terrible emotional pain. This is the time to apply the principles of chapter 2 (on counseling those in pain and counseling those in sin, since both apply).

If a believer commits suicide, he will go to heaven. But make sure the person understands that if he is willing to commit the sin of suicide, there is no guarantee that his salvation is genuine.

## Chapter Summary

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Why selfdestruction is wrong, according to Scripture:

- The stewardship principle
- The servanthood principle

How to recover from failure:

- Accept forgiveness.
- Set your mind on things above.
- Realize the situation can be redeemed.
- Develop a willingness to suffer.
- Don't universalize the problem.

Selfesteem makes the problem of selfloathing worse, not better. The solution is humility. With any thinking obsession, seek to discover the point at which thinking departs from the right path.

For the suicidal person, show compassion and warn of the possibility of hell.

**Key passage:**

Colossians 1:10-14

Review questions:

1. Why is it wrong to destroy our bodies?
2. How do you help a person develop the ability to recover from failure?