

Baha'is with Eating Disorders

By Susan Gammage ¹

I fully admit that I've had no personal experience with eating disorders but, over the years several friends and acquaintances have asked me what the Bahá'í Faith says about this condition. Although I have not found any specific guidance in the Baha'i Writings about this topic there are some spiritual principles which come to my mind.

A non-Bahá'í with eating disorders once scrolled through my book Violence and Abuse: Reasons and Remedies <https://www.amazon.com/Overcoming-Abuse-Violence-Compilation-Writings/dp/1988668077/> and read this extract from the Writings.

As this physical frame is the throne of the inner temple, whatever occurs to the former is felt by the latter. In reality that which takes delight in joy or is saddened by pain is the inner temple of the body, not the body itself. Since this physical body is the throne whereon the inner temple is established, God hath ordained that the body he preserved to the extent possible, so that nothing that causeth repugnance may be experienced. (Selections from the Writings of the Báb, p. 95)

She told me via email that: "If I could really believe that was true, my eating disorder would be gone"!

She intuitively understood that embedded within this quote was the connection between:

- The body and the soul
- The inner life and the outer life
- A way to regain control by focusing on protecting the body in order to get to delight and joy and let go of pain

The principles that come to mind are:

Everyone in the family and friends have a part to play:

The work of healing the sick, however, is a matter that concerns not the patient and the practitioner only, but everyone. All must help, by sympathy and service, by right living and right thinking, and especially by prayer, for of all remedies prayer is the most potent. "Supplication and prayer on behalf of others," says 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "will surely be effective." The friends of the patient have a special responsibility, for their influence, either for good or ill, is most direct and powerful. In how many cases of sickness the issue depends mainly on the ministrations of parents, friends or neighbours of the helpless sufferer!

¹ Prepared by David Bowie (2023) for posting, with permission of author, at https://bahai-library.com/gammage_various_essays

Even the members of the community at large have an influence in every case of sickness. In individual cases that influence may not appear great, yet in the mass the effect is potent. Everyone is affected by the social "atmosphere" in which he lives, by the general prevalence of faith or materialism, of virtue or vice, of cheerfulness or depression; and each individual has his share in determining the state of that social "atmosphere." It may not be possible for everyone, in the present state of the world, to attain to perfect health, but it is possible for everyone to become a "willing channel" for the health-giving power of the Holy Spirit and thus to exert a healing, helpful influence both on his own body and on all with whom he comes in contact. (Dr. J.E. Esslemont, Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era, 1980 edition, p. 112. https://bahai-library.com/esslemont_bahauallah_new_era)

A family consultation, preferably with someone skilled in bringing about a unified decision would be good.

When a believer has a problem concerning which he must make a decision, he has several courses open to him. If it is a matter that affects the interests of the Faith he should consult with the appropriate Assembly or committee, but individuals have many problems which are purely personal and there is no obligation upon them to take such problems to the institutions of the Faith; indeed, when the needs of the teaching work are of such urgency it is better if the friends will not burden their assemblies with personal problems that they can solve by themselves.

A Bahá'í who has a problem may wish to make his own decision upon it after prayer and after weighing all the aspects of it in his own mind; he may prefer to seek the council of individual friends or of professional counsellors such as his doctor or lawyer so that he can consider such advice when making his decision; or in a case where several people are involved, such as a family situation, he may want to gather together those who are affected so that they may arrive at a collective decision. There is also no objection whatever to a Bahá'í asking a group of people to consult together on a problem facing him. (Universal House of Justice, Lights of Guidance, p. 179, #589)

All healing comes from God.

All is in the hands of God, and without Him there can be no health in us! ('Abdul-Bahá, Paris Talks, p. 19)

Without following God's laws, it will only get worse:

Praise be to Him, ye are acquainted with the various laws, institutions and principles of the world; today nothing short of these divine teachings can assure peace and tranquillity to mankind. But for these teachings, this darkness shall never vanish, these chronic diseases shall never be healed; nay, they shall grow fiercer from day to day. (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 249)

We need a combination of treatments – spiritual and physical.

There are two ways of healing sickness, material means and spiritual means. The first is by the treatment of physicians; the second consisteth in prayers offered by the spiritual ones to God and in turning to Him. Both means should be used and practised.

Illnesses which occur by reason of physical causes should be treated by doctors with medical remedies; those which are due to spiritual causes disappear through spiritual means. Thus an illness caused by affliction, fear, nervous impressions, will be healed more effectively by spiritual rather than by physical treatment. Hence, both kinds of treatment should be followed; they are not contradictory. Therefore thou shouldst also accept physical remedies inasmuch as these too have come from the mercy and favour of God, Who hath revealed and made manifest medical science so that His servants may profit from this kind of treatment also. Thou shouldst give equal attention to spiritual treatments, for they produce marvellous effects. (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, pp. 151-152)

We need to consult the best specialist AND follow his advice.

It is incumbent upon everyone to seek medical treatment and to follow the doctor's instructions, for this is in compliance with the divine ordinance. (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 156)

We need prayer:

Turn thou toward God with thy heart beating with His love, devoted to His praise, gazing toward His Kingdom and seeking help from His Holy Spirit in a state of ecstasy, rapture, love, yearning, joy and fragrance. God will assist thee, through a Spirit from His Presence, to heal sickness and diseases. (Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá v3, pp. 628-629)

Love goes a long way:

The love and consideration he has been shown by the friends, and by the members of your Assembly in particular, will, he feels certain, help to a marked degree in counter-acting the painful effects of the insidious disease from which he is so severely, yet so uncomplainingly suffering. (Shoghi Effendi, *The Unfolding Destiny of the British Baha'i Community*, pp. 124-125)

Being of service can also help.

By Thy Power, verily, the sweetness of servitude is the food of my spirit; with the fragrance of servitude my breast will be dilated, my being refreshed, my heart delighted, my eyes brightened, my nostrils perfumed, and in it is the healing of my disease, the allaying of my burning thirst, the soothing of my pain. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í Scriptures*, p. 265)

It is important to maintain our personal spiritual practices.

- Reciting one of the Obligatory Prayers with pure-hearted devotion each day.
- Reading the Sacred Scriptures every morning and evening, with reverence, attention and thought.
- Prayerfully meditating on the teachings, in order to understand them more deeply, fulfil them more faithfully, and convey them more accurately to others.
- Striving every day to bring our behaviour more into accordance with the high standards that are set forth in the Teachings.
- Teaching the Cause of God.
- Selflessly serving the work of the Cause and in carrying out our trade or profession.
- Participating in the core activities.
- Sacrificially giving to the Fund.
- Keeping our Huqúq (Right of God) up to date.

During my research I found the following Bahá'ís who specialize in eating disorders (among other things). I don't know them personally – just what I've read on their websites:

Mahsa Migalski is a Marriage and Family Therapist specializing in individual and couples-work, depression, anxiety, trauma, grief work, eating disorders, and self-injury

https://therapists.psychologytoday.com/rms/name/Mahsa_Migalski_LMFT_Schaumburg_Illinois_178759

Marzi Radpour-Wiley is a Licensed Clinical Psychologist with a special interest in women's mental health issues specifically related to sexual trauma, adjustment struggles, eating disorders, and personality disorders; adolescents and adults with mood and anxiety problems <http://www.healthcare4ppl.com/physician/tennessee/chattanooga/marzi-r-radpour-wiley-1427046200.html>