



In His Image: How Faith Can Heal Our Relationship with Our Bodies

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MENTAL HEALTH

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Can the gospel ease body shame in eating disorders? Love from God, purpose, and progress over perfection can aid healing.

Though body dissatisfaction can often seem like an isolated and unique experience, countless individuals struggle to love their bodies. As a gift from God and a vital part of His plan, the body is one of Satan's most prominent targets. He may make individuals feel alone in their trials, but body image issues are widespread.

Approximately 0.28% to 2.8% of the [U.S. population](#) will experience an eating disorder at some point in their lives, and numerous others may resort to disordered eating (e.g. diets or unhealthy eating behaviors that don't fully qualify as an eating disorder).

Additionally, about [75%](#) of people are dissatisfied with their body size. Often in religious

settings, the faithful are taught from a young age that their bodies are temples and are gifts from God, but still some struggle to love their bodies and wish to change them.

As part of a study at Brigham Young University (Van Alfen et al., under review), seventeen active members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who had previously suffered from an eating disorder were interviewed about the impact of their religion on their eating disorder and recovery. As these members (whose names have been changed) talked about how their church doctrine and culture impacted them, a considerable number brought up how love and purpose were able to help them both throughout their eating disorder and as they recovered. However, others also brought up how they had to change their views of what it meant to be perfect. Through these narratives, we hope to offer hope to those currently struggling with an eating disorder or to those who are supporting a friend or loved one who is struggling with an eating disorder.

Love

President Jeffrey R. Holland taught “The first great *commandment* of all eternity is to love God with all of our heart, might, mind, and strength—that’s the first great commandment. But the first great *truth* of all eternity is that God loves us with all of *His* heart, might, mind, and strength.”

Many of these research participants expressed sentiments of being able to love their bodies because they knew that God loved them. As Ashley, a young female participant from Utah, said, “Heavenly Father loves me because I’m myself and not some image in a picture.” Likewise, Olivia, a young adult who grew up outside of Utah, shared, “Just because someone else is skinny, it doesn’t mean God doesn’t value me or love me or care about me. The doctrine has played a major part in my healing process or processes.”

In addition to feeling loved by our Heavenly Parents, several of the members brought up their relationship with Jesus Christ, and knowing that He died for their sins also helped them to love their bodies more. Olivia expressed, “The Atonement of Jesus Christ, that

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is something that has always helped, especially when I'm feeling my lowest." Whitney, a young participant who grew up outside the United States, also shared:

It's hard for me. There are people [who] would be like, 'Oh yeah, ...Christ knows how you're feeling.' I'm like, 'But how could he know what ...a 19-year-old girl is feeling when she hates her body?' [Because] I just feel like it's such a different experience for everybody. But also, it just felt like there's no way anybody else could know what this is like. And I think of just coming to like, develop that relationship. Like He understood...where I was mentally. Maybe he never hated His body ... But He cared about my struggles and He understood my mental difficulties that I was having in every aspect. Not just about my body.

Knowing that their Heavenly Parents loved them and Christ had atoned for them helped these members to find peace and work on accepting their bodies.

Purpose

In addition to knowing they were loved, many brought up the idea that knowing that God had given them their bodies and had a plan for them gave them purpose and helped them in their relationship with their body. Sophie, a middle-aged female participant who grew up internationally, observed:

It gives me perspective in the sense that my body was an essential part of the plan of happiness, like I completely understand this and that always brings me appreciation that I know that I chose to come here to receive a body and that was my choice.

For several participants, God's plan helped them have a long-term or eternal perspective on life, their bodies, and what was most important. Sophie continued:

I'm still far from where I would like to be in terms of being completely happy with my body. But typically, when I can envision this kind of truth, it gives me a perspective that my bra size really does not matter in the grand scheme of things.

Lastly, Cristin, a middle-aged participant from Utah, described how she was able to find deeper meaning and purpose during a low point in her eating disorder:

There's something deeper ... that I'm not put on this Earth just to be this physical being. Because I felt so low, that you get to that point where you like it's not worth it anymore, if this is all that it is. That I don't want to have to go through this all the time. It's exhausting. So if it's just restriction and isolation and avoiding food and avoiding people, so I don't have to deal with that, there's gotta be more to life than that. And that's really helped me in a way, see that there was more to life than the physical and that deepened my faith.

Because these participants knew that God loved them and had a plan for them, this helped them as they healed from their eating disorder and learned to love their bodies.

Perfection

Though many were able to cling to knowing that God loved them and had a plan for them during their recovery, others also brought up a sometimes unspoken pressure to look and be perfect. Various women shared how they had to gain a better understanding of what it meant to become perfect as they recovered. Naomi, a younger participant who grew up outside of Utah, shared:

I think we have a culture of comparison, and I don't think that has anything to do with doctrine. ... I know that's not what God wants us to be doing. But because we're all striving to live better lives and just to improve ourselves spiritually, I think that can just kind of bleed into other areas ... I think it's because we are taught to improve ourselves and to repent and to be the best that we can, to be closer to God. And I think maybe people interpret that as like, how am I appearing to other people? And maybe misinterpreting it a little bit.

Similarly, Ellie, a middle-aged participant who grew up outside of Utah, explained, "Obviously, we have doctrine on becoming perfect, but it's the act of making improvements, right? Rather than, I think what a lot of people see as the definition of being perfect without flaw."

Though these participants had started their journey of recovery, many have not. Just as these participants did, members of The Church of Jesus Christ struggling with body image should focus on beliefs such as that Heavenly Father created our bodies and loves each individual as they are, our bodies are an essential part of the Plan of Salvation, and we are working on progression, not perfection. All of these teachings can be vital in supporting individuals in forming a healthy body image.

We encourage all leaders and church members to take a close look at their congregations to determine how they can cultivate a culture of body acceptance tied with religiosity. This could start by leaders and members praying about how they can cultivate a culture of body acceptance in their specific congregation. Then they can encourage frank discussions about body image so congregants can have an open space to discuss often-unspoken feelings about these issues. This could include discouraging comments about weight or body shape and instead emphasizing the eternal significance of the body as well as differentiating between perfection and progression, including in our appearances and health.

Additionally, acceptance could be fostered through [artwork](#) that represents a variety of body types, skin colors, and abilities. Lastly, this could entail creating a nonjudgmental environment and opportunities within one's congregations, quorums, classes, or families to openly discuss body image, media pressures, health, appearances, ability, why God made each of us uniquely, and how that knowledge may influence the way we see those around us and our own body. This is important for both men and women to discuss. For as President [Holland](#) has noted,

There is no universal optimum size ... I plead with you young women [and all] to please be more accepting of yourselves, including your body shape and style, with a little less longing to look like someone else. We are all different. Some are tall, and some are short. Some are round, and some are thin. And almost everyone at some time or other wants to be something they are not!

Ultimately, God made every individual unique and wants all to be invited to come, join, and be loved. We are all created in His image. And in that shared truth lies the

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beginning of healing—knowing that, as unique children of loving heavenly parents, through Christ we are enough, and we can be made whole.

Reference: Van Alfen, M. A., Christensen-Duerden, C., Hirschi, T., Siddoway, C., Coyne, S. M., Ashby, S. Gale, M., & Graver, H. *Sacred bodies, silent struggles: A mixed methods study of religiosity and eating disorders among Latter-day Saints in the United States*. Under review.

*For additional resources to help yourself or a loved one improve body image see:

<https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/resource-center/>

<https://www.thehealthy.com/mental-health/body-positivity/improve-body-image/>

<https://www.morethanabody.org/>

About the authors

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