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INTRODUCTION

In my twenty years at the YMCA, I have witnessed a revolution in the area of body image. Everybody is concerned about the way they look, which is normal. But I've seen that too much of a good thing easily becomes an obsession.

Perhaps you have selected this book because you want to change some aspect of your body. I encourage you to become not a perfect specimen of the human race, but the person *you* desire to be. This should be our goal in this study. So what does having a healthy body image look like? When a person has a healthy body weight and is physically fit, but is obsessed with food and with working out, or secretly exhibits signs of bulimia or anorexia, this is not healthy. Eventually these behaviors tear the body down and create addictions and all sorts of emotional problems.

For years, when I struggled with depression and low self-esteem, I tried to control those struggles by focusing on how I looked. Since I felt unacceptable, I thought if I could present myself as physically acceptable to the world, then somehow I could mask my deep sense of inadequacy. I desired affirmation from people and achieved it. I was good at deceiving people, to my own detriment. Most thought I was healthy when, in fact, I was sick. My self-esteem depended on how people viewed my physical image.

Watch the ads on TV for exercise programs and diets and you'll discover our nation's obsession with body image. We've witnessed this at Restore Ministries. There's a polarization with body image—extremes in

opposite directions. One direction leads to obsessions with exercise and food. We want to feel accepted and loved through acceptance of our bodies. The other direction leads to addictions with food. We use food to help us deal with the pain and discomfort of not having a perfect body. We give up on obtaining the perfect body and establish a sick relationship with food. Food becomes a way to comfort the pain of feeling flawed.

What are the truths regarding our relationship with our bodies and with food? Throughout this study, we'll identify patterns that are not healthy and take steps to move toward healthy patterns. Our goal is to make peace with our bodies and with our lives. Obesity is at an all-time high in our country. Eating disorders are more prevalent than they've ever been. Food and body obsessions are destroying the quality of our lives, and we need to find a path to freedom. Today I don't have the near-perfect physical body that I had ten years ago—but I am far healthier than I have ever been. I am comfortable with how I look, I love to be active and eat well because of how it makes me feel (instead of how it makes me look), and my self-esteem and self-worth are not derived from how I look. At the same time, I am aware that at times I still feed something in me that's not hunger.

My desire, as you read through this study, is for you to identify your eating and exercising habits. What are your patterns with food and exercise? Are they obsessive? Are they normal? How well are you doing with body image? Let's discover a way to make fitness and health not an obsession, but something that adds years and enjoyment to our lives.