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### Diet and Culture: A Toxic Combination

Few people have devoted much thought to diet culture, but almost everyone has encountered it at least one way or another. Diet culture is a part of everyone's lives, possibly without ever realizing it. We live in a society where we are all exposed to messages promoting dieting, body shaming, and focusing on physical appearance. The need to be thin is the true craving. However, today's diet culture's widespread prevalence has likely contributed to its widespread detrimental psychological and physiological impacts.

When did the words "diet" and "culture" become such a toxic combination? The definition for *diet*, according to Merriam-Webster, is "food and drink regularly provided or consumed." From the same source, *culture* provides us with the definition "the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group." The two words separately describe food and lifestyle, which could interpret as a good time with food and people, something everyone enjoys; yet, when the two words are combined, it has a significant impact on human health and well-being. So, how did we get here?

This may surprise you, but the very first diet book, *The Art of Living Long*, was published in 1558 and written by an Italian by the name of Luigi Cornaro. This spicy meatball, who was struggling with being overweight and unable to please his wife, was instructed by his physician on several occasions to limit his intake of food and alcohol. It was not until his physician warned him, Cornaro divulges, "that if I neglected to apply this remedy, in a short time, it would be too late to derive any benefit from it; for in a few months, I should certainly die." Being afraid of

death, Cornaro changed his ways, wrote a book about it, and somehow his journaled experience became the blueprint of diets.

It is clear, as in the case with Cornaro, that to maintain a healthy lifestyle, limiting oneself to food consumption is the key to this success. Nevertheless, who sets the limits? What are the limits? Diet culture, in its many different forms, has stepped in to tell us what is and is not acceptable, which can be very confusing.

We have all heard it before, "Eat healthy and exercise."

Brands like *Eat This, Not That* punch us in the gut with their overwhelming website, eatthis.com, with its ambiguous introduction: "How you eat impacts every aspect of your life, which is why making the right food choices everyday matters—and *Eat This, Not That!* is here to help." Navigating through the compiled sources of information is similar to scrolling through TikTok; eventually, you forget why you were there.

With exercise, "roughly 21 to 42 minutes" a day seems to be the ideal time to be physically active, according to the *Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans* by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, reported by CNBC.

Furthermore, when you think you have figured out a plan for a workout, you find yourself being kicked in the knees by valuable sources like Dr. Caitlin Lewis, who specializes in sports medicine, forewarns, "Anybody can be at risk for over-exercising, not just athletes."

The Cleveland Clinic posts in their newsletter an article addressing "Signs That Exercise Is Actually Hurting Your Health," where the doctor from Cleveland explains, "...overtraining happens to people who are just starting a program and do too much, too soon." By combining the advice from healthcare professionals, you can get your daily exercise through the many trips you might take to the restroom.

As confusing and hilarious as the conflicts may be, diet culture weighs heavily on our lives. Pop culture and social media have undoubtedly increased the popularity of diets today. By perpetuating the idea that thinness is the ideal body type, they promote unrealistic and often unhealthy body standards, crash diets, and extreme weight loss strategies. There is no shortage of celebrities and influencers pushing diet products and diet trends on social media.

One of the most influential people on social media is the prominent figure and most recognizable face, Kim Kardashian. Kardashian could promote, "Eat your feces, lose 20 lbs. in a day." As disgusting as that sounds, there is no doubt that she would have a following. (Clearly, your weight loss would be from vomiting, but you get the idea.) She spent years promoting diet teas, diet shakes, and appetite-suppressing lollipops. Yes. Lollipops. The rounded candy on the end of the stick that children suck on for a sugary treat.

Kardashian captioned, "They're literally unreal," under a photo of herself sucking the diet candy in an Instagram post that Vogue recognized. The only thing "unreal" about promoting the diet aid is Kardashian's actual diet.

The U.S. Sun reported that in another Instagram post, Kardashian wished her plastic surgeon, Dr. Simon Ourian, a "Happy Birthday" in the comments before making what appears to be a public confession. She reveals she has had work done, including "...to the man who keeps [her] looking so young."

Kardashian is not the first celebrity to promote a specific diet in this disturbing world of diet culture, nor is she the first to be criticized for it. Recently slammed in TODAY for discussing her "wellness routine" involving intermittent fasting and bone broth, the willowy Gwyneth Paltrow admitted, "...[it] doesn't sound like much."

Of course, it doesn't, but to be fair, if you listen to the podcast *The Art of Being Well* with Dr. Will Cole, Paltrow does not give any indication that she is trying to promote this lifestyle; yet, being a Hollywood A-lister, she ended up promoting her régime without even setting out to do so.

As a culture, we associate thinness with superiority in beauty, health, and prosperity. Pervasive media messages highlighting a slim ideal and the diet and fashion sectors frequently contribute to this fixation on thinness. Thinness is often viewed as a symbol of self-discipline and self-control, qualities that are highly regarded in many societies. Paltrow and Kardashian, both svelte icons, are advocates for healthy living and will make an impact whether they set out to or not.

As young children, what we might see in the media may ingrain this idea of perfectionism in our minds. To be thin is to be accepted. Researchers at Arizona State University used social network analysis to investigate the factors influencing friend selection. A heartbreaking response by Associate Professor David Schaefer reported, "We found consistent evidence that overweight youth choose non-overweight friends more often than they were selected in return."

As a direct result, young overweight individuals tend to have fewer friends than their peers of average weight. Additionally, young people are more inclined to exclude people who are overweight from their social circles.

Friendships, regardless of age, can enhance how we feel about ourselves. Still, when we are discouraged about our appearance, most of us will complain to our friends. With social media within arms' reach, messages about dieting and body images can be hard to escape. It is essential

to be aware of how diet culture can affect us daily, understand what *your* limits are, and to practice self-care and self-compassion.

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