

So what exactly is diet culture? I think we can all relate to having experiences where we don't feel our body is "good" or "healthy" enough based on its size or shape. Or we've had someone comment on what we're eating with a connotation that suggests food is something other than fuel and enjoyment. This is diet culture at work.

Diet culture is the social expectations, beliefs, and practices that tell us how to eat and look, and that if we are a certain size we are more accepted. Diet culture is the system that elevates thin bodies above all others, often interpreting thinness as a sign of both health and virtue. Diet culture is a moral hierarchy of bodies fueled by health myths. Diet Culture is the messaging that tells us that appearance and body shape are more important than physical, mental, and general well-being

Diet culture is made up of the things that make you feel like you have to control your food and body in order to be socially acceptable, beautiful, and healthy.

This sort of thing is rampant in our culture, and is fueled by the stigma around weight that we've internalized and continue to externalize through dieting, fatphobia, and the weight-loss industry. Weight stigma, also sometimes called Sizeism, is the system of beliefs in our society that places value and worth on weight, condemning higher weights as unhealthy/bad and idealizing thinness. It fosters discrimination and negative feelings towards those in larger bodies.

An article on weight stigma from the APA says: "Sizeism is one of the most deeply entrenched stigmas in today's society, partly because of sociocultural ideals tying thinness to core American values such as hard work and individualism. The implication is that people in larger bodies lack willpower and discipline." This stigma is horrible to experience and research has shown that it can cause harmful behaviors to affected

individuals. The APA has conducted studies that show that individuals who experience weight stigma are more likely to engage in health deteriorating behaviors. Experiencing weight stigma increases the risk of disordered eating habits such as anorexia, bulimia, or binge eating disorder. People who experience weight stigma are also less likely to exercise in public because they feel uncomfortable, and they are more likely to avoid seeking medical care for health problems.

“For example, patients commonly report that physicians attribute all health problems to excess weight and make assumptions about patients’ health behaviors, such as assuming that they overeat. Experiencing bias in health care settings can cause patients to trust their providers less, practice “doctor shopping,” and delay or avoid seeking treatment for various health issues” (Abrams).

The weight-centered nature of our healthcare system is a huge consequence of diet culture and weight stigma. Despite lots of research showing that weight is actually a very poor measure of health, our medical system continues to use weight (more specifically BMI) to make large assumptions about a patient's health. BMI is a ratio comparing height to weight that was created in the late 19th century by sales agents at insurance companies trying to decide what to charge their policyholders. Data was self-reported and primarily from wealthy, white, male individuals. It created ratios that if you met them or were above, you were classified as “overweight” or “obese.” Despite there being no medical advice or health-based research that went into adopting this system as a measure of health, doctors soon started using it to determine patients' health because it was simple and easy to calculate (Gordon 54).

Though dieting and weight-loss have been a theme in our culture since industrialization, the 1960s was when the diet industry really began. Coming out of World War II people had access to more food again. Marketing and consumer products began to really trumpet weight-loss and slimness as something to be sought after, marketing a smaller body being associated with a strong and disciplined personality. Weight-loss products such as Metrecal (a promised weight-loss and appetite suppressing drink) and other weight-loss diets and fitness trends such as Weight Watchers began to circulate in the media and industry (““You Might Disappear!”). This industry has evolved as time has progressed, new diet fads coming and going. Today, intermittent fasting, low-carb, keto, veganism, paleo, and so on are some of the new diet trends that we see being encouraged by media and advertising. The diet and weight-loss industry is a huge business and made \$78 billion in 2019 alone (“Home”).

The connotation in our society of being classified “overweight” or “obese” is that you are unhealthy and the solution is to lose weight. In June 2013, the American Medical Association voted that “obesity” should now be considered a disease. The dictionary definition of a disease is “a harmful disorder of structure/function that has a known cause and a specific set of symptoms.” Obesity is defined in medical terms as “an excess accumulation of fat.” There are no other clinical signs/symptoms connected to obesity (Karasu). The classification of a disease gives doctors the ability to prescribe obese people medications to supposedly “cure” their disease. This ideology keeps the diet and weight-loss industry profitable. It also keeps us disconnected from ourselves and constantly at war with ourselves and each other. Weight stigma is another method to create yet another hierarchy in our culture to elevate some people to the top.

“Dieting maps seamlessly onto the preexisting American narrative of failure and success as individual endeavors” (Tovar 37). In her book *You Have The Right To Remain Fat*, Tovar writes about the American Dream of being able to pull yourself up by your bootstraps here. American culture says that if you try hard enough and want something enough you can get it; deeming any failure, entirely your fault. It is from this ideology that diet culture has arisen. America tells us we need to be thin and gives us “simple,” “easy,” diets and products to use that will supposedly get us thin. It creates this idea that anyone who is not thin has failed and is a failure. The American Dream tells us that our society is perfect, and if you don’t fit society’s expectations you are worthless because you don’t work hard enough to deserve respect.

There has been significant research into the actual effects of dieting and weight that has found that weight-loss can actually be extremely harmful and ineffective in the long term, and weight doesn’t usually correlate to health. This research is beginning to be more widely known and a new rise of dietitians and health-care professionals are beginning to call themselves “anti-diet” and/or “weight-inclusive.”

One of the larger studies/movements heading this hopeful change in public health is the Health At Every Size movement. This is a public health ideology that seeks to reduce bias towards people in larger bodies and cultivate a health-care system that de-emphasizes weight-loss as a health goal. There has been insight and research into this idea since the turn of the century. Most recently, Dr. Linda Bacon (Ph.D in nutrition and physiology) conducted a study in which 78 “obese” women were divided into two groups: one group was on a typical weight-loss program with dieting and exercise, and the other group was encouraged to eat when they were hungry, honor their hunger and

bodies, and move in ways that made them feel happy. After two years, both groups weighed approximately the same; the weight-loss group having lost weight initially but then gained it back. The women in the second group (the one not on the weight-loss plan) showed healthier blood pressure, cholesterol, and were much happier with themselves and their bodies.

Every person has a weight set-point that is genetic and your body will try and keep your weight there no matter what you do. When you diet your body senses it as something wrong in your body. Your hypothalamus (the part of your brain in charge of hunger and metabolism) will slow your metabolism down and increase your hunger to try and get you to get enough nutrients and conserve what energy you do have. The effects of a slowed metabolism and the crisis mode your body goes into when you diet account for a lot of the health issues our society attributes to weight (Cornelius).

Where can we begin when it comes to dismantling this harmful and toxic system? It is deeply entrenched in so many aspects of our society that it often seems impossible to escape. However, so many amazing people and organizations are already at work trying to debunk the myths about weight and health that diet culture tries to tell us, and change policies and media that discriminate against larger bodies.

One solution that is at work already is shifting our healthcare system from its current weight normative model to being weight-inclusive. The current weight-normative healthcare system puts emphasis on weight and weight loss when defining health. Our approach to healthcare has long used BMI as a measure of health,

blamed larger people's health issues on their weight, and prescribed restriction and overexercise as treatments.

Like I mentioned earlier, research is beginning to consistently show that weight is not a reliable marker of health and that this stigma around weight actually has far more dire consequences. Weight-normative healthcare has shown to prevent people from seeking out help for medical issues because of fear of the reaction to their bodies. The resulting weight stigma from this system is also connected to poorer mental health, the rising rates of eating disorders, inflammation, diabetes, increased cortisol, and so many other health consequences. Additionally, the weight cycling (rapidly rising and falling weight) that happens as a result of the weight loss regimes often prescribed by healthcare professionals is connected to high mortality rates as well as lowering metabolic function and raising your natural weight set point (Dada).

The alternative healthcare model to this is a weight-inclusive approach. This system is based on the assumption that weight is independent of health and well-being. This approach does not focus on weight, seeks to end stigma, and prioritizes supportive and healthy practices like honoring your hunger cues, eating nutritious foods, managing stress, self-love, and moving your body in ways that bring you joy. This approach has been shown to improve physical and mental health, reduce stress and stress related diseases, and cultivate self-love and trust ("The Weight-Inclusive versus Weight-Normative Approach to Health).

The University of Vermont put out a very insightful and helpful article detailing evidence and strategies for adopting a weight inclusive healthcare system. They provided some guidelines on things healthcare providers and society can do to shift

towards this approach. Some of their suggestions include excluding weight and stigmatizing language from policy goals and public health campaigns, eliminating BMI charts and reports, focusing on modifiable health behaviors rather than weight, and avoiding federal funding of weight-loss treatments (Thompson, *Table 1*).

Another way I believe we can push back against weight stigma and diet culture is by diversifying the bodies and relationships to food we see in advertisements and the media. Social media platforms like Instagram and Tik Tok are used by billions of people across the globe, predominantly young adults and teens. A recent study from The University of Vermont found that the most viewed food content on Tik Tok is promoting weight-loss as a means to a happier life in a more likable and attractive body. The study found that billions of people were watching videos made by people with no nutrition experience or knowledge, videos telling people how to eat or what the creators ate and then showing off their own super skinny body (“Weight-normative messaging predominates on TikTok”).

Social media platforms like Instagram and Tik Tok often suggest content to users’ feeds without the person searching anything which can bring someone to “weight-loss challenge” or “what I eat in a day” videos easily without even looking for them. This can be damaging to people's feelings about their bodies and food, but can be especially harmful to those with eating disorders when they get a #appetitesuppressant or #lowcalorierecipes suggestion by simply trying to go look at their friends newest post.

Our society and the media are also ripe with advertisements and images portraying some foods as bad and some as good, when a lot of it is based on marketing strategies

and not actually science. It is very easy to open a magazine and get told to eat the low-calorie granola bar so you don't gain weight, but also to buy tons of Kraft mac & cheese for such a cheap price, all on the same magazine page.

We see images of thin, muscular people everywhere, seeming to idealize something we're supposed to be. The media loves to sell attractiveness, often associating a smaller body with beauty and then trying to sell some lifestyle or product to go along with it. It becomes very difficult to feel worthy of respect and love when you can't see yourself in any of the images you see around you, and it becomes very easy to lose touch with your own intuition and interoceptive awareness when there is constantly content telling you of a new way to be "better."

Recently, the toxicity of this culture is becoming more recognized and people, organizations, and companies have been taking good steps to change the way they do things. Modeling agencies are diversifying their boards so that different body shapes and sizes are more likely to be displayed in ads and in the media. Stores are creating plus size mannequins and expanding plus-size selections for clothing. The food industry is still very entrenched in diet culture, however more awareness has been raised to the harms of diet culture so diet language has begun to shift from being weight and appearance centered to more "lifestyle" and "wellness" trends. Social media platforms like Instagram have also created the ability to censor the content you see and they made an easy option to send comments detailing why a particular piece of content bothered you. In 2019 they also began regulating content depicting or encouraging weight-loss or disordered eating to stop it from being suggested to people whom it could harm (Hern).

I am very grateful for all the changes that are being made in our society to shift away from the harmful and untruthful beliefs that have been causing damage and confusion for so long. While there is still so much stigma and toxic diet culture all around us, I do see the people and things working against the system and I am so ready to join this force. I think we are heading towards a time where we will learn to trust ourselves and recognize the beauty in diversity, but there is work that needs to be done to get there and it will take all of us. I believe we can get there, I hope we can do it together. Let's start by honoring our bodies and learning to know for yourself what is helpful to your body and what is not.

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