

How Cultural Pressures Contribute to an Eating Disorder

The cultural pressures to have the “perfect” body are all around us. They're manipulating and impressing our minds every day. Let's take a closer look at some of the influences we are facing in the world around us, and even closer home, in our own communities. One of the more obvious pressures is the magazines we see displayed at check out counters, in the waiting room at the doctor's office, or even in your own living room. **These magazines use bold words and pictures to define the perfect body** with plenty of tips on how to get there. **“How to lose 10 pounds in 10 days.”** “Eat the foods you love and lose weight.” **“How to lose weight and keep it off.”** “Firm up your belly muscles and lose inches.” **“Fit into your dress from 5 years ago.”** Or, “take a walk to work off your lunch.”

Depending on the books we read, many will describe the main character as being slender and beautiful, making a connection between your size and beauty.

The way social pressures affect our view of body image is a huge subject in itself. By body image, we mean the way you perceive your body to be – what you see when you look in the mirror, what you feel when you wrap your arms around yourself, and what you tell yourself when you compare your body with others. We hear a lot of comments around us that portray the way people feel about their bodies, and how they believe their bodies should look. You may hear a school teacher complain that she put on so much weight over summer vacation. A family wedding comes up and the bride's mother feels she just has to lose weight and you watch her skip desert. Another friend tells you about the new diet she's on, how many pounds she's lost, and how many more she needs to lose before she's finished.

We also face the pressure of all the feedback given to those who have lost weight. Comments such as “Oh, you look so good! How much weight did you lose? What diet are you on?” or “Wow! I admire your self control!” **Weight loss and self control are admired and praised.**

What about the ones of us who are built a little heavier? We may hear remarks behind our backs about the lack of self control, or how they feel so sorry for us to have to carry around that extra weight, or how determined they are not to become like us. Some will even offer suggestions about how they could lose weight. The obvious opinion is that skinny is more socially acceptable than fat.

Another pressure, that way too many young people face, is teasing. Parents and teachers, please be aware! Teasing cuts deep and destroys a

child's relationship with their body. From a very young age it can build their impression of what is considered an acceptable body. It forms their view of themselves as a person, which can definitely be the beginning stages of an eating disorder. **They feel it's their fault that they are not accepted.**

Walk through the grocery store and you'll face the pressure of food labels such as: **“low fat”, “30% fewer calories”, or “only 3 grams of fat per serving.” (These labels are very triggering to an eating disorder.)**

“Healthy” eating is another pressure we face. Many different kinds of flour – such as almond, oat, rice or coconut – and sweeteners – such as xylitol, erythritol, maple syrup or stevia – are considered better for you with fewer calories besides. Plus alternate milk products such as soy, almond, coconut or rice milk.

There are many cookbooks that cater to these foods. **These cookbooks focus on “healthy” carbs or “healthy” fats** labeling foods as either good or bad, healthy or unhealthy which is a very dangerous mindset. The eating disorder will take this to extremes and say that all carbs or fats are bad.

In some communities, the popular opinion is that whatever ails you can be fixed by adjusting your diet. **Do you have low energy? Struggling with depression? Dealing with indigestion? Just do a food sensitivity test and find out what foods you are eating that your body cannot tolerate, and then eliminate them from your diet.** This method often cuts out important food groups, leaving us with a much more narrow range of options, which an eating disorder loves.

Now what about cleanses and detoxes? We hear a lot about them. Many people think they are very beneficial for your health and weight loss. **Does our body need us to cleanse it periodically from all the junk in our diet?** The truth is, our bodies are designed in such a way that, giving them the right balance of nutrition and drinking enough of fluids, enables them to detox naturally, just the way God intended. Cleanses and detoxes actually flush out a lot of good vitamins and minerals that our body then has to rebuild. The much healthier option is to give our body the proper nutrition and let it cleanse itself.

Now pay attention to the conversations around you. You'll be amazed at how often food enters the discussion. It may be exchanging new recipes, exclaiming about how good a food was, discussing healthier versions of a food we enjoy that's loaded with calories, or moaning about how full we feel when we've finished a meal. **Food talk is not all bad,** but please keep in mind

these comments are extremely triggering to someone with an eating disorder.

So how do we respond to all this? You might be thinking, “big deal. Who cares what people say?” Well, I'm going to tell you that the eating disorder

cares a lot. It takes everything that people say and magnifies it. It hears every comment and lodges it firmly in your mind, forming your belief system. It makes you acutely aware of your body. You compare your body with others on what you see. **The eating disorder is also a pro at distorting your vision.** What you see in the mirror, is many times not what other people see when they look at you. **Because of all the opinions around us, we feel that our worth is somehow determined by our size, instead of by our inner strengths and talents that we've been blessed with.** We tend to compliment someone on how they look today rather than on some quality we noticed about them, like their smile, hearing them sing or seeing them take time for someone. So much emphasis on appearance often leads to low self-esteem. Our mind is a painfully critical judge, and it seldom gives us the satisfaction of feeling like we are okay. Instead it insists that if we lose a couple pounds we'll look and feel so much better. We'll have more friends and feel like we're worth more. The problem is, when we reach that goal weight, it's never good enough. Always we need to be just a little bit less. **Low self-esteem tells us that we're worthless, unnoticed, unloved, and unlovable.** It tells us that no one can appreciate us the way we are. We're not good enough – don't measure up.

An eating disorder promises us that we'll find our worth if we are successful at losing weight. The longing for self worth is one of the things that makes an eating disorder so powerful and addicting. The eating disorder tells us that we will be in control. When life seems out of our control, eating is something we can control, and see results, which feels satisfying. The problem is, the more we give in to the eating disorder, the more it makes us feel out of control, because it's never good enough. We always feel like if we would just restrict a little more, we'd feel better. But the “better” never comes. **So it leaves us feeling inadequate and as if we don't have the control that feels so important to us.**

The eating disorder is master at making us feel bad about ourselves, which leads to depression. We feel we're caught in a hopeless cycle, with no way out. One behavior just lead to another, and we feel powerless to break the cycle. We dread getting up in the morning and facing a new day. It looks much easier to crawl under the covers and not face food at all. **We deal with extreme anxiety about each meal.** Will we have strength and will power to fight off our hunger again? And what if someone comments on the fact that we're not eating? How will we respond to that? Some many things to worry about!

The eating disorder also feeds anger. We become angry at life, at our body, and at the voices of those who love us and are trying to help. Our eating disorder wants them to shut up and leave us alone, so it can

continue to control our behaviors. We feel like we have to do what the eating disorder is telling us, so we become very frustrated at those who are telling us to do the opposite.

Those of us with eating disorders tend to isolate from each other. It's a very lonely life. How can we relax around people when we're constantly comparing ourselves and assuming that they're thinking negative things about us? And we definitely don't enjoy social events where food is involved. **We become wrapped up tight in a world that involves only us and our eating disorder.** We aren't able to put our focus and energy into having close relationships, so we withdraw and become lonelier and lonelier. We don't understand that it hurts our family and friends to see us struggling so hard. It strains relationships because they want to help, but the eating disorder won't let them in. It's like it puts an invisible wall between us and our loved ones. It becomes terribly difficult for us to express our emotions and feelings, because the eating disorder steals our voice. The only voice we can hear is the loud, demanding voice of the eating disorder. We say, "This is how I feel," when it's really how the eating disorder feels.

To begin to break free, we have to practice separating ourselves from the eating disorder, and see it as a totally different person from ourselves. The eating disorder voice is so strong that it feels like this is who I am, but it's not. Everybody has a healthy voice, no matter how quiet it is. We need to stop and think what we would tell someone else who is struggling like we are. Would we tell them the nasty things we tell ourselves? Of course not! We'd try to encourage them and tell them how beautiful, precious and worthy they are. We'd try to help them see themselves as we see them. That is our real voice – our healthy voice. We need to start separating the voices.

When the eating disorder is screaming at us, you can help by asking us what we would say to someone else in the same situation. It will help us identify our healthy voice. At first it feels impossible to believe that we are not our eating disorder, when that's the only voice we hear. It's a journey to recognize the almost silent healthy voice inside us and once we recognize it, it's an even longer journey to be able to listen to it, or act on it.

So friends, please be patient. Our eating disorder didn't develop overnight and it won't go away overnight either. Whatever you do, don't give up! Keep reassuring us of the truth over and over. It might seem like we're not hearing you, but don't stop. Be the healthy voice for us, reminding us what we can't tell ourselves in the moment.

Please watch your conversations! Anything about food, or body image is very triggering to us. Do we need to discuss diets, weight loss or cleanses? Why do our conversations so often turn to food, or to what's healthy or unhealthy? Why do we need to spend time discussing our bodies instead of

something deeper like our goals and dreams? **Let's look away from our bodies and focus on living! Let's take off the pressure to conform our bodies to someone else's mold.** Let's focus on things that add value and meaning to our lives, and build a better view of ourselves. You can make a difference by steering conversations away from food and body image subjects. There's so many more helpful things we can share about. **Let's start to make a difference, one conversation at a time!**

written by a PMRC Resident