

Diet Culture

By: Kate Sweeney, MS, RDN and Sage Maconga

What is diet culture and how does it permeate our society?

Diet culture is a system of beliefs and rules that promotes weight-loss at any cost to achieve the appearance ideal. It equates being in a small, lean body as healthier, with moral and social superiority. *"Diet-culture stems from racist, sexist, puritanical notions that deprivation is a virtue, pleasure is sinful, and we can all lift ourselves up by our bootstraps and obtain perfect health and thinness if we just eat the right things."* - Alexis Conason, PsyD.

But, we aren't born with food rules and weight is not equivalent to health. There is a societal "food police" reinforced by media and others that form a collective cultural voice and can become our inner voice. Some common phrases people say when they're under the influence of diet culture include, "___ has too many calories", "I need to work off this food", or "I'll gain too much weight if I eat ___" among others. **The goal of diet culture is ultimately, oppression, especially of minorities, people in larger bodies, and women. And when our voices are silenced, others have power.**

Why can dieting be harmful?

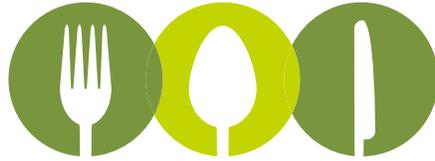
While diets are attractive because they offer hope for happiness and a false sense of control, they are actually depriving; diets lead to restrictive behaviors that lead to poor overall health. Diets include labeling foods as "good" and "bad," or restricting eating after at certain time in the evening, or only eating a certain food "because you exercised." Dieting can lead to under- or over-nutrition, the lack of ability for your body to understand how much food it needs and when, and worsened mental health. **In fact, diet culture fuels weight stigma, which is shown to have negative health consequences.**

What does it mean to reject diet culture?

Rejecting diet culture means reconnecting with our bodies, rejecting arbitrary "food rules", enjoying food and the experience of eating, not obsessing about exercise, eliminating guilt, practicing self-care, and finding belonging. **This is a radical idea, and one that requires rejecting the status quo.**

See the next page for information on intuitive eating, balanced eating, and more resources!





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What is Intuitive Eating (R)?

Intuitive eating (IE) is giving yourself permission to eat any food, honoring your hunger, and respecting your body's signals. It includes eating for physical reasons versus emotional ones and eating when hungry then stopping when full. It is NOT a hunger/fullness diet! It means FULL permission to eat what you want, and to trust and listen to your body. IE also includes body acceptance, letting go of body ideals, exercising for pleasure, and finding satisfaction in food.

Research on IE is clear- it improves mental health, clinical indicators of health like blood pressure and blood sugar, and decreases risk for eating disorders (Lindardon, et al 2021).

What is Balanced Eating?

Balanced eating overlaps with IE. There are 3 key ideas to balanced eating:

- **Moderation:** Giving full permission to eat and being mindful of hunger, fullness, and satisfaction.
- **Variety:** Keeping your taste buds interested and eat diverse nutrients by incorporating different food groups. Remember, no one food provides all essential nutrients!
- **Adequacy:** Generally, eating every 3-5 hours, keeping in mind that there is no perfect amount of food or perfect time to eat.

Where can I learn more about diet culture and how to properly nourish my body?

- Boston College Center for Student Wellness
- Women's Center Love Your Body Week and other initiatives

