

The pinnacle of fitness

Is there such a thing as “too fit?” Popular culture’s attention on the “healthy lifestyle” has never been greater; yet, 70 million people worldwide suffer from eating disorders, a number that has doubled since 1960. Society criticizes these individuals for their body image obsession and restricted lifestyle. At the same time, other individuals who exhibit their lifestyles emphasizing exercise and a carefully curated diet have even become celebrities on social media, gaining thousands of likes and followers from image-based sites such as instagram. They are known for the state of their bodies and spend a significant amount of time planning and documenting their care of it- some could call this lifestyle an obsession or at least a fixation. So what sets these fitness superstars apart from the disordered?

As a young adult growing up in this new health conscious world, my awareness of “the perfect body” and importance of a healthy lifestyle have always influenced my daily life choices. Internalized, they have shaped the way I view my physical and -- self, consequently affecting my life choices. These factors along with some personal qualities have helped me find my way into the category some would call health obsessed.

I’m not sure when my interest in diet and exercise began. My first memory concerning body awareness reaches all the way back to my third grade classroom, where I was seated on the floor, watching an educational movie next to my best friend. We each sat in the shape of an L with our legs stretched out in front of us. I noticed that my legs were much thicker than hers, even though I was a couple inches shorter than she. Like the average ten year old, I still had no concept of muscle, fat, and weight, but for some reason I was already concerned about comparing the shape of my body to others.

And my shape was small. Always in the front row of the class picture, I jokingly whined about my height and miniature shoe size; while in truth, it actually pleased me, for I felt unique. But I was not just a tiny girl; my shoulders are broad and my thighs are thick for my height. Consistent with my elementary school observations, many would categorize my natural body shape as “athletic”; and it has always served me well, especially considering after school sports consumed my free time during high school and middle school years. I was always proud of my strength and my ability to keep up with the boys despite my size. It didn’t bother me that I wasn’t as skinny as some girls (except for the difficulty in finding shorts for big booties).

Since I was comfortable with my body, it never occurred to me that I should change it. Therefore, I believe my fixation on diet and exercise did not come from a poor body image, but from a need for control and an overly competitive nature. I have always been an extremely competitive person- and not only in sport or game. My goal is not necessarily to win anything, but to be the best. While at times this quality has made ambitions and productive person, it has corrupted me, making all aspects of my life competitive, including those without competitors, such as personal health. In these cases, I have been forced to compete against myself, trying to become better by outdoing my previous accomplishments.

My first memory of unhealthy diet habit is from my freshman year of high school when I was dealing with pancreas problems that caused me to feel nauseous after every meal. Throughout the day, I ate as little as possible to avoid the pain. Instead of being alarmed by my habit of attending school then tennis practice in the South Carolina heat with a half of a turkey sandwich as my only fuel, I was delighted by my self-control. I remember one particularly bright and humid afternoon, feeling as though I would faint, and was proud that I could push myself to that physical limit.

Luckily, surgery remedied my pancreas problem later that year, so my diet restrictions temporarily lost their cause.

As I grew out of my stormy teenage years, I turned from being an overly sensitive dramatic to the relatively pragmatic individual I am today. Reason and research overtook feeling as the regulators of my actions and decisions—a significant shift that changed my daily life. Naturally, being the human being that I am, decisions based on diet and exercise occurred quite frequently (read: constantly), though now were based on my research that dictated optimal health rather than on the way my body felt.

After reading a popular diet book and trying vegetarianism one Lent, I adopted a vegan diet. For me, the evidence of the health benefits (or avoidance of health issues) and my new found dietary self-control were compelling reasons to take on this new challenge. I was headed off college, a new stage of life, and I was ready to take control.

Now, I wouldn't really call my freshman year in the dorms "healthy." I began running and tried to exercise regularly, but any benefit I gained was more than offset by the things I was consuming. Unfortunately, my school had very poor dining options, especially for vegans. Determined to stick to my new diet, I ate an eclectic mix of oil-soaked vegetable sides, no-protein sandwiches, and whatever snack food could make its way onto campus. And alcohol. I drank a lot of alcohol: plastic handles of vodka, Sunset Blush Wine bags, warm Busch lite, nothing was off limits. I gained a pleasant little freshman-5.

Being on campus, I had little control over my health decisions, especially when it came to food. Admittedly, alcohol consumption and exercise habits are a different story; but when you're constantly surrounded by so many people, and it's your first time living on your own, personal decisions begin to meld with that of the group.

The next year (and all the years following), I moved off-campus. I lived with three girls rather than 40, and I finally had a kitchen where I could cook well-balanced vegan meals. I was all set to live my perfect, healthy, Californian life; but by nature, I'm a little bit of an idealist and an extremist, and had yet to learn that the body doesn't necessarily function that way.

Like achieving good grades, health became another one of my goals. As I became more aware of my body through positive practicing such as yoga and running, I also became more conscious of its fat and muscle. In my extremist way, muscle=good, fat=bad; sugar=bad, calories=bad, preservatives=bad, oil=bad, chocolate=ALWAYS GOOD (nothing could ever change my mind there). All of these conclusions were in accordance with my research. I was making smart decisions

based on what the experts on the internet had told me. I ran further, restricted my diet to a very limited amount of acceptable foods, and reaped the compliments of strangers who noticed my toned arms. But there was no end point in site. I had lost 20 pounds yet I was continuing to find ways to “improve” my fitness. I spent hours researching how to make workouts more effective and finding which foods were the most nutritious and the least caloric. I refused to miss a day of exercise. I would avoid certain social situations because they interfered with my planned eating schedule. Health is supposed to improve one’s life, yet it was controlling mine.

My dietary decisions had become almost ethical with its systematic way of choosing the “right” from the “wrong.” My goal wasn’t to look like a model or a professional body builder; I just wanted to be right. But if we’ve learned anything from cancer, its that the wonderful system of the human body doesn’t always work systematically. It’s unpredictable, therefore its needs must be re-analyzed daily, not planned in advance using the guidance of a book.

In the increasingly obese and undernourished paradox of a society we live in, health education is essential. It helps us make informed decisions for our bodies based on what the typical body needs; however, it definitely has its limits. Our bodies are unique as our personalities and have physically undergone a unique set of experiences. Consequently, each body has different needs that are constantly changing based on its environment. It knows what it wants, and we have to trust it.

But, I never gave my body enough credit. I ignored the signs it gave me, fearing that every craving was evil and would send me spiraling into obesity. Then I moved to New York, where things move a little faster. I didn’t have time to obsess over the validity of my decisions, particularly diet. I began to trust my instincts, my body, and most importantly myself. I learned that I am smart, and that if I make informed decisions desiring the best objective outcome, then I’m doing alright. Sometimes, I’ll be wrong, but nobody is perfect- just like no body is perfect.

Health is a state of physical wellness; its allows a person to use their body as a vehicle to enjoy and experience the world through actively living. It has no other purpose. Obsessions hinder a person from fully appreciating life by distorting and limiting their view of the world and by filtering the meaning of their experiences. Health is not a state of perfection; it is a means to an end. By making it a focal point of their life, the health obsessed individual reverses the goal of the very thing they center their attention, lessening the meaning they find in their own life. At least that’s the way it was for me. I’m glad that our society now praises habits that will allow its members to live longer and hopefully, fuller. However, I believe that we all still need a reminder of health’s role in our life, or maybe just a reminder to live.

Because there is no pinnacle of health, just a way for an imperfect body to interact with its perfect world.

Cuts

Anorexia and bulimia have become almost ordinary in the young adult population; however, they are certainly still looked upon negatively in the eyes of the health conscious community.

Personal health is just that: personal. Apart from trained dietary professionals, no other person can be or should be the judge of another individual's health. It's the way you feel due to the state of your body- how can someone judge that through looks? It changes the goal of health from being an ideal functionality of one's body to the look of the body. It is no longer altruistic, but vanity. Sure, posting pictures on instagram and facebook can provide encouragement towards a healthy lifestyle by gaining the support of the community, but it also gives them the power to judge the state of one's wellbeing without the insight necessary to achieve the proper ends.