

## Restrictive Eating in College Students

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## **Introduction**

Growing up, many American adolescents experience several social and environmental interactions that can affect their eating habits. Restrictive eating affects around 9%, or 28.8 million Americans in the United States (ANAD, 2021). Eating disorders are behavioral conditions characterized by severe and persistent disturbance in eating behaviors and associated distressing thoughts and emotions. They can be very serious conditions affecting physical, psychological and social function (Guarda, 2021). The most prevalent cases of eating disorders have come from teenagers from the ages of 14-25, putting college students right in the middle of this demographic. A 2013 NEDA survey estimated that between 10% to 20% of women and 4% to 10% of men in college suffer from an eating disorder. Four of ten students have either experienced an eating disorder themselves or know someone who has (Emily Program, 2021). College can be a very strenuous environment for students due to stress from classes and feeling the need to fit in socially which can be one of many driving forces behind certain eating disorders. In a college campus survey, 91% of the women admitted to controlling their weight through dieting. (ANAD, 2021)

Restrictive eating may be caused by several factors. These include genetics, brain biology, personality traits, and cultural ideals. People may develop restrictive eating behaviors due to psychological or emotional problems that have occurred due to low self-esteem, perfectionism, or troubled relationships. Emotional troubles have been linked with restrictive eating, in that 53% of people with restrictive eating behaviors, such as anorexia nervosa also have an anxiety disorder (Gerhardt, 2021). Genetically, there are certain genes in the body that people may have that can increase their risk of developing a restrictive eating disorder. Specifically,

research results showed results of Chromosomes 1 and 10 that appear to be significantly linked to anorexia and bulimia. (McGuire, 2017)

There are countless different types of eating disorders that contribute to the behavior of restrictive eating, the three most common including; anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge-eating disorder. Anorexia Nervosa is characterized by abnormally low body weight, intense fear of weight gain, along with a distorted perception of weight and body shape. This disorder can be potentially life threatening when the efforts to reduce the weight are used when already underweight or malnourished. Based on international data, the lifetime prevalence of anorexia nervosa for females ranges from 0.3%-1.5% and for males ranges from 0.1%-0.5% (Linardon, 2021). People experiencing Bulimia Nervosa endure episodes of binge eating without strong control over their actions. This eating disorder can also force people to expel themselves of the extra calories in very unhealthy ways such as vomiting, and then restrict their eating for dangerously long amounts of time after purging due to guilt of gaining weight. Binge-eating disorder is very similar to Bulimia nervosa in that the person is still overwhelmed with a need to binge-eat with a lack of control over the eating. However, with this disorder, the person does not attempt to compensate for the drastic gain of excessive calories. This disorder can lead to someone being a normal weight, overweight, or obese. The lifetime prevalence of binge-eating disorder for females ranges from 2.5%-4.5% and for men ranges from 1%-3% (Lindardon, 2021)

In order to combat these related issues, organizations like Healthy People 2030 have worked to increase awareness of the determinants of healthy and unhealthy behaviors like the various restrictive eating behaviors. Healthy People 2030's mission is to promote, strengthen, and evaluate the nation's efforts to improve the health and well-being of all people (Healthy People 2030, 2021). Through looking into objectives under "Healthy Weight and Eating," there were 27

objectives showing the government's desire to help people understand healthy weight proper nutrition through health care visits with certified physicians (NSW-05). Teaching the importance of nutrition and healthy weight can help support a better diet and self-image for these college students and help prevent the onset of restrictive eating behaviors.

### **Intrapersonal Factors**

Intrapersonal factors include the internal characteristics of the individual such as knowledge, attitudes, behavior, self-concept, skills, and developmental history. These factors happen within the individual. Individual psychology is a major contributor to these behaviors due to restrictive eating behaviors being from mental illness. Understanding these self-promoted behaviors and the motivation behind them can help to determine the personal reasoning of doing a behavior.

Some intrapersonal factors include the psychological factors of an individual such as low self-esteem, feelings of inadequacy or lack of control in life, depression, anxiety, anger, stress or loneliness (ED, 2016). College students are much more prone to experiencing these factors due to the fact that they are coming into a new environment, meeting new people, and having the need to feel wanted and have a sense of perfectionism. Perfectionism is one of the strongest risk factors for an eating disorder, especially a type of perfectionism called self-oriented perfectionism, which involves setting unrealistically high expectations for yourself (NED, 2020).

College students can also experience a sense of body image dissatisfaction. Body image can be defined as the combination of the thoughts and feelings that you have about your body. Body image may range between positive and negative experiences, and one person may feel at different times positive or negative or a combination of both (NEDC, 2021). There are four

different aspects of body image that can each severely affect the mental health of a college student, including; perceptual body image, affective body image, cognitive body image, and behavioral body image. Perceptual body image is specifically the way that someone sees their physical body in their own mind or perception. This is usually more self-oriented and is not always a correct representation of how their body actually looks. A large percentage of college students experience perceptual body image and this body dissatisfaction has been found to have a connection with restrictive eating behaviors. “Women who perceived themselves as being heavier than they truly are were more likely to report taking action to lose weight, including partaking in unhealthy behaviors such as vomiting and taking diet pills. This group of women was also more likely to have an eating disorder, either anorexia or bulimia” (Swierkosz, 2021). College is a very stressful time and frequently causes overwhelming anxiety because it's so new and different from any life experience before it, and students' minds are overloaded. Recent research finds that 48-51% of people with anorexia nervosa, 54-81% of people with bulimia nervosa, and 55-65% of people with binge eating disorder are also diagnosed with an anxiety disorder (NEDA, 2018). This, along with a childhood history of anxiety disorders can be major contributors to developing a restrictive eating behavior in college students.

### **Interpersonal Factors**

Interpersonal factors include anything that happens between an individual and someone else whether it be on another person or multiple groups of people. These factors are made up of cultural factors, which include language, belief systems, morality, perspective, and customs, and situational factors, which include physical and social environments. These factors are important to measure because it is crucial to understand how one's social network and society influences one to make certain behavioral choices.

Some Interpersonal factors pertaining to the behavior of restrictive eating could include troubled family and personal relationships, difficulty expressing emotions and feelings, a history of being teased or ridiculed based on size and weight, or a history of physical or sexual abuse (ED, 2016). Social factors and relationships have a crucial influence on restrictive eating behaviors among college students. Social pressures such as the glorification of thinness and the societal view of a perfect body being skinny, narrow, and having a particular body weight shape create a sense of caution for people. For example, people with anorexia nervosa can make them see themselves as overweight even though they may be dangerously thin. In spite of the perceived importance of supportive social relationships in recovery, patients with eating disorders report having small social networks which are of poorer quality than non eating disorder controls people with Anorexia have been observed to be typically shy and socially withdrawn and report engaging in fewer social leisure activities and more solitary activities (Patel 2016).

While being an intrapersonal factor, body image can also contribute to being an interpersonal factor for restrictive eating behaviors in college students. A major interpersonal reason for an individual's dissatisfied body image is bullying. Bullying and tormenting in college students has been greatly associated with an increased risk for eating disorders and restrictive eating behaviors. One out of every five (20.2%) students report being bullied and Of those students who reported being bullied, 13% were made fun of, called names, or insulted; 13% were the subject of rumors; 5% were pushed, shoved, tripped, or spit on; and 5% were excluded from activities on purpose (NBPC, 2021). The constant ridicule towards an individual's size and shape oftentimes will reflect in an increase of cognitive distortions often with the fear of gaining

weight, becoming fat, or not obtaining the ideal shape and size that is thought to be appropriate for social encounters, which in turn persuades them to result to restrictive eating behaviors.

Along with bullying, domestic violence is a strong reason for an individual. Domestic violence, also known as “domestic abuse” or “intimate partner violence,” can be defined as “a pattern of behavior in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner including any behaviors that frighten, intimidate, terrorize, manipulate, hurt, humiliate, blame, injure, or wound someone. There is no discrimination of who can experience domestica violence, it affects people of all socioeconomic backgrounds. The unwanted physical, mental and psychological consequences as a result of these actions and behaviors have been found to have a correlation with increased mental health issues, such as mood disorder, suicidal behaviors, and eating disorders and restrictive eating (APA, 2021).

### **Organizational, Community, Environment and Policy Factors**

The awareness of restrictive eating has grown not only at an individual level, but to a community and organizational level. Many different factors can contribute to the prevalence of restrictive eating and different eating disorders in all populations but most specifically college students. Organizations, communities, environments, and policies can sway an individual’s choice and method of weight loss and contribute to restrictive eating.

At a community level, in the past decade social media has taken the world by storm where anyone and everyone can see everyone and everything about someone just with the push of a button. Social media is a huge part of modern life and can have a significant impact on an individual’s thoughts and behavior. Some types of social media have been used to share images and messages that promote restrictive eating. Edited images and dieting promotions from friends, family or peers can lead to low self-esteem, extreme food restriction and an unhealthy

relationship with food and appearance. This is especially true among college students, who being in the age range of 18-21 means that they grew up with a constant use of social media. With social media on a college campus, everyone knows everyone and it gives that place a sense of community, however in this community, the negative effects of social media can be from the opinions of close friends which can have an extremely significant impact on a person's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. According to the National Eating Disorders Association, as many as 65% of people with food-related disorders in the United States say bullying contributed to their condition (NEDA, 2021).

At an environmental position, the college and university environment both have a significant influence on the prevalence of restrictive eating. Shifting from the highschool to college environment can be a very stressful situation from getting new friends, discovering new stress, and obtaining practically a whole life. New college students also transition from small classroom sizes and friend groups with familiar faces everyday, to thousands of new people to meet and opportunities to explore. Although for some, this is an amazing life change, for most it can be a very hard environment to adapt to, especially where although the individual is surrounded by hundreds of new friends, they can feel more alone than ever. The inability to adapt to these overwhelming changes with newly found independence can cause immense amounts of stress and anxiety that can create unhealthy behaviors such as disordered eating and restrictive eating. While approximately 6% of women on college campuses meet the criteria for anorexia or bulimia, as many as 40% report body image concerns, weight management behaviors due to social pressures, burgeoning identity, and first tastes of independence (Veritas, 2021)



From a public policy standpoint, the government has continued to use policies to push for reducing obesity without incorporating the opinions of those with restrictive eating habits. The government has been blind to the effects that the dietary guidelines and mandatory calorie listings that have been pushed for Americans through the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act have had on the large population of people with restrictive eating behavior. These policies allow individuals to have varied opinions on their current health situation due to the idea that the government is attempting to lower obesity ratings. Their opinions are swayed to believe that they too are overweight and need to lose weight, even if they are already a healthy weight or below. It also can cause individuals with restrictive eating behaviors to feel self-conscious when seeing more labels on food. Government enforced policies such as calorie disclosures on food labels can provide justification to restrictive eaters for the elimination of foods and valuable nutrients that they are inclined to avoid.

When evaluating restrictive eating at an organizational level, there have been many beneficial organizational movements that have helped raise awareness towards restrictive eating. In the past couple of years, the public has shifted away from valuing thinness in men and women and have shifted toward a more inclusive portrayal of full healthy bodies. Nike is an organization that is now synonymous for its indiscriminate campaigns and advertisements. Its latest move to use plus sized models and mannequins fight to discover the correlation between physical health and mental health.

### **Theory**

Obtaining an understanding of how and why people execute certain health behaviors is a major component of determining theories that can better explain the reasoning behind these actions and the other factors that influence it. The Health Belief Model and Social Cognitive

Theory are great tools that can be used and have been used in the past to determine the influences of restrictive eating in college students

### Health Belief Model

The Health Belief Model is a theoretical model that can be used to guide health promotion and disease prevention programs. It is used to explain and predict individual changes in health behaviors. It is one of the most widely used models for understanding health behaviors. The Health Belief Model defines the key factors that influence an individual's health behavior using five main constructs. These six main constructs include the individual's perceived susceptibility or perceived threat to sickness or disease, perceived severity or the individual's belief of consequence, perceived benefits or potential positive benefits of action, perceived barriers to action, cues to action or exposure to factors that prompt action, and self-efficacy or an individual's confidence in ability to succeed. (HBM, 2021)

In relation to the population of college students with restrictive eating behaviors, the model allows researchers to observe through the perspective of these individuals with these restrictive eating behaviors, their perceived level of risk to dieting and restrictive eating, and overall their general understanding and perception and healthy weight and body image. The model also helps to identify the potential benefits of implementing a healthy lifestyle, as well as the barriers of dieting and healthy weight management and possible ways to overcome these. This model will finally be able to show the self-efficacy, and confidence in an individual's ability to complete a behavior of healthy eating, healthy body image, and weight management. A study was done to identify specific barriers and deterrents individuals living with eating disorders and restrictive eating behaviors perceive when deciding if and when they will seek eating disorder-specific social support. The results of this study showed that using the five main

constructs of the health belief model, results could be used to inform and improve therapeutic interventions to produce better long-term outcomes among people struggling with eating disorders (TL, 2013)

### Social Cognitive Theory

Created by Albert Bandura, The Social Cognitive Theory describes the influence of multiple factors on the Individual health behaviors of someone. This theory focuses on four main concepts: self-regulation, reciprocal determinism, social influence, and cognitions (Clinkscates, 2019). Self-regulation can be defined as the controlling one's behavior, emotions, and thoughts in the pursuit of long-term goals. Reciprocal determinism refers to the dynamic and reciprocal interaction of an individual with a set of learned experiences, the external social context and the responses to stimuli to achieve goals (Clinkscates, 2019). These along with the influences from the social environment and the internal cognitions from the individual at hand play a major role in the ability to change a behavior.

When evaluating the environment, is it crucial to identify both the physical and social factors that come with it. The physical factors come from the environment itself with both context from situations as well as feedback. The social factors come from the impacts from social groups and networks and how the individual is influenced by them. These factors are crucial in developing possible behavioral change. Specifically in Japan, a combination of the lack of education towards healthy lifestyle choices and the lack of awareness towards the dangers of eating disorders and restrictive eating have led to a drastic rise in eating disorder cases and a spike in prevalence. According to a study, the prevalence of anorexia nervosa among adolescents is similar to that found in Europe and the US. Many environmental factors also contribute to this spike such as the 2008 “Metabo Law,” which requires those aged 40–75 to keep within certain

waist measurements. This rule was promoted all over Japan with posters and signs (Makino, 2004).

When evaluating the behavioral perspectives and self-regulation, body image research related to restrictive eating behaviors comes from the cognitive or behavioral paradigms in psychology. People with eating disorders and restrictive eating behaviors often experience difficulties in regulating emotions and behaviors. The main causes of these body image discontent have a range of self-regulating factors from predisposition, precipitation and maintenance. A study by the *Journal of Eating Disorders*, using the social cognitive theory on individuals with eating disorders, proposed that studying the different ways that people receive help with managing their emotions (Christensen, 2020). Using the Social Cognitive Theory to gain an increased control and knowledge on self-regulation is crucial to development and refinement of behavioral change linked to emotional stress, eating disorders, and restrictive eating.

### Suggestions For Intervention

After uncovering and evaluating the many different aspects that influence the behavior of restrictive eating, there are multiple factors that should be considered when conducting and planning for suggesting intervention methods to help promote a healthier lifestyle and prevent these behaviors. Eating disorders are not a choice, rather a serious illness that can affect any population of all gender, race, age, body shape and weight. Restrictive eating and eating disorders in general are horrific cycles of damaged mental health and interventions are key to interrupting the cycle and beginning change in college students.

The first step in helping fight against a problem is knowing about the problem. Learning about the many different eating disorders as well as restrictive eating and understanding warning

signs can greatly improve the chances of being able to help a friend if problems with this behavior emerge. It is also important to speak out when these behaviors do emerge. Individuals with restrictive eating behaviors are often afraid to ask for help or have such low self-esteem that feel they may not deserve help. It is important to reach out and help as well as letting them know for the future that they have someone to lean on and talk to. While forcing someone with an eating disorder to get better will not necessarily work, having supportive relationships is vital to their recovery. Your love and encouragement can make all the difference.

Considerable efforts have been made to reduce the prevalence of eating disorders and restrictive eating behaviors on college campuses through implementation and dissemination of evidence-based screening, prevention, and treatment. However, accessibility to facilities for college students struggling with eating disorders are still too low with rates of eating disorders and restrictive eating behaviors being greater than ever before. By raising awareness and spreading knowledge to all college students and all around college campuses about these disorders and the importance of speaking out, students can feel more inclined to help fellow students struggling with eating disorders. Increasing easy accessibility to help facilities for these individuals can greatly increase the amount of students receiving help. A study by eating disorder experts at Washington University School of Medicine using a phone app focused on women on college campuses via a questionnaire that evaluated whether each woman was at risk for an eating disorder, such as binge eating disorder or bulimia nervosa. (Dryden, 2020)

For more serious cases, such as one where an eating disorder leads to substance abuse as well, a serious professional intervention is crucial to help the individual obtain the best care possible. These interventions are thorough assessments from a professional therapist in a facility specific to disordered eating patients. A big component of this level of intervention is using love

rather than pain, shame or fear which are emotions that usually prevent an individual from getting or even looking for help. This level of intervention is important because it helps prevent possible harsh consequences and if addressed in time can prevent death.

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