Ditching Diet Culture

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It happens every New Year. A huge influx of ads promoting the newest juice cleanse or the best diet service. Maybe you or someone you know has tried one of these services. Did it work? It most likely did not, and it may not be because of a lack of effort on your part. Services like these are a part of diet culture. Diet culture is the widespread idea that being thin is the same thing as being healthy and happy. In order to achieve this body type people are encouraged to take part in extreme diets and exercise regimens. Diet culture bases your worth on your body or diet. It is extremely prevalent in our society and it can show up anywhere. In conversations: "You look so good! Have you lost weight?" In advertisements: "I tried this new diet and I lost ten pounds!" But what we do not talk about are the consequences. Most of the diets promoted by diet culture are unsustainable and do not lead to healthy weight loss. The promotion of the idea that being thin is the equivalent to being healthy can cause people to take dangerous measures in order to achieve the thinnest body they can. Diet culture also equates a person's value to their body, instead of putting value on what really matters. For all of these reasons, we need to push back against diet culture and fight for change in how we talk about health in our society.

The first argument one sees on the behalf of diet culture is the fact that some people need to lose weight for medical reasons, and in order to lose weight they are suggested to diet. However, research has shown that restrictive diets are ineffective for long-term weight loss. According to a 2018 study on long-term weight management "In a meta-analysis of 29 long-term weight loss studies, more than half of the lost weight was regained within two years, and by five years more than 80% of lost weight was regained" (Hall and Kahan). This proves that dieting is often futile in the long-term, as lost weight will end up regained in most cases. Despite what one might be told by television ads promoting the newest weight

loss program, restrictive diets are not the route one should take if they are looking to lose weight for medical reasons. A more effective route is to be mindful about what you eat. Instead of trying to cut down calorie intake in general, as is a staple in most diets, a more effective route to take is to make simple changes to your lifestyle. A WebMD article suggests walking more often, meal-prepping, and swapping refined grains for whole ones as simple but effective changes. These changes are more sustainable, which leads to more weight being lost and kept off in the end. All in all, the restrictive diets pushed by diet culture are ineffective in long-term weight loss. If one needs to lose weight for medical reasons, making sustainable changes to one's lifestyle is the most effective route to take for weight loss.

Not only do the restrictive diets idolized by diet culture fail to work, they can also lead to an eating disorder further down the line. The National Eating Disorder Association reports that thirty-five percent of normal dieters develop pathological dieting patterns. Pathological dieting is defined as continuously eating a diet that is insufficient in calories or nutrients. Of those who pathologically diet, twenty percent will go on to develop a full fledged eating disorder. Eating disorders can affect anyone, and they are debilitating conditions. They often interfere with daily life and can cause serious health problems if left untreated. For example, anorexia nervosa is an eating disorder that is characterized by an extremely low caloric intake that results in an unhealthily low body weight. One study found that if left untreated anorexia can result in osteoporosis, or low bone density, that leaves people at a higher risk for bone fractures. Even more seriously, eating disorders have some of the highest mortality rates of any mental illnesses. Depending on the eating disorder in question, the mortality rate can range from two percent to almost six percent according to an analysis of thirty-six different studies. The fact that people are driven to such serious conditions in the pursuit of the thinness that diet culture perpetuates needs to change. Diet culture often portrays being thin and toned as the only way to be healthy, but in reality health looks different for everyone. We need to start portraying this, or the false narrative of extreme thinness as the norm will continue. To summarize, diet culture glamorizes restrictive diets that can prompt eating disorders, which are life-threatening conditions.

Lastly, diet culture equates thinness and fitness with a person's moral value and health. As a result, people who fail to meet the standard maintained by diet culture often feel inadequate. In an interview with Healthline one woman recounts "I spent years dieting and obsessively working out because I wanted to lose weight and look the way I imagine in my head. However, pressure to follow a restrictive diet and exercise plan has been detrimental to my mental and physical health." (Ariel). People should not hinge their worth as a person on their weight or physique. These things do not determine one's worth. Feeling like one has little value because they do not align with the toxic standards perpetuated by diet culture is all too common. Instead of putting moral value on one's kindness or ambition, they base their own merit on the number on the scale. In order to combat this we need to fight against diet culture. Instead of complimenting people on their physical features or physique, compliment them on their personality or accomplishments. Stop basing someone's worth on their body. Succinctly, diet culture places a person's value on their weight rather than on things that actually matter.

In conclusion, the ideas perpetuated by diet culture are harmful and we should do our best to fight them. Promote healthy and sustainable ways to lose weight in order to combat the restrictive fad diets proposed by diet culture. Know that a healthy body looks different for everyone and everyone has different food needs. The restrictive diets endorsed by diet culture combined with the value put on slender bodies can lead to eating disorders, which are debilitating. Finally, put worth on aspects of people that actually matter. Rather than commentingon someone's physique, mention their personality or accomplishments. In order for people to be healthy and at peace with their bodies we need to stop promoting the impossible standards of diet culture. It's time to ditch diet culture. It was a toxic relationship anyway.