
The Important Role Of Society In Shaping People's Views On Weight Loss

Weight loss in society has created an obsession for many people. In this essay I will show how society is ultimately to blame for this process of obsession and how it has created exercise mania that leaves some people desperate to create the "perfect" body. This is ultimately another form of health consciousness that has flooded western ideals of what it is to be healthy. It has created a niche market that is fueled by public demand. This demand has its roots in the media by creating the ideal of what the perfect body should be. The media thus creates a following of these ideals by the masses. Finally, western ideals are guided by the democratic model that the people control. All of these factors tie in together to make a society that is obsessed with the "perfect" body.

Before, discussing the topic at hand we must first look at the issue of what society views as "perfect". The image that often comes to mind is famous models and top athletes, such as Cindy Crawford and Mark McGwire. These people are often the idol of many people and set the bar to model themselves to. They create the image of what it is to be "perfect". The belief that the "perfect" body is unattainable is untrue a reality for most part it takes time, hard work and lots of dedication to become a reality.

Health consciousness has many avenues but one that hasn't been covered all that much is exercise addiction. This idea first came to light in the 1970s when the jogging craze swept the western nations. A study produced some insight in this new area. Though the study was one sided it got the "ball rolling" The study called "positive addiction" took on the idea that exercise was good for you and thus doing more of it will only make things better. (Gasser, Happer and Row, 1976) This notion however is now seen in a different light. Exercise addiction has begun to be seen as an addiction like anything else. It is believed that when exercise becomes the main concern over work, family and relationships. Most individuals who suffer from this disorder will exercise even if they are injured or sick thus putting their own health at risk. When an individual misses a planned workout time studies show that the addicted individual will experience,

"Anxiety, headaches, restlessness, sleeplessness, guilt, lack of appetite, irritability, sluggishness, tension, apathy or discomfort"

(Fisher, Wrisberg, 2004). Such systems are for the most part classic examples of a withdrawal of an addiction. This not only proves that exercising can become addicting but also that too much exercise can be a bad thing. What does all this have to do with sociology? A lot actually, the main theory used in "Fisher and Wrisberg" 2004 paper shows that the "social theory suggests that addiction is a process rather than a condition". What this means is exercise is the run of the mill manner taken to the point of "dependence, compulsion or pathology" It is basically a coping strategy gone badly. In essence if the exercise, for example weight training is started for fun and then turns to a "must do" to rid him or herself of possible guilt of not performing the exercise. Another sociological viewpoint is that exercise addiction can create a "positive deviance". This is the idea that there is an over compliance of social norms. The person will start to make tough sacrifices in order to put him ahead. It becomes an addiction to distinguish oneself above all others like his or her idol did. An example of this sacrifice can be seen in an

article by Colleen S. Hughes and Suzanne Hughes depicts colleen's addiction to exercise. This article shows how the effects of sports and social standings can affect the mental and physical well being of the individual. Colleen was in denial about her eating and exercise regimen. This obsession affected almost every aspect of her life. She lost friends because she had barely any time for them and they in turn felt wary about her behavior. This article proves that exercise addiction is not only about the individual but about how that person perceives society seeing them. (Hughes and Hughes, Aug2004)

The New industry that has opened up due to this new health consciousness is now creating new social order. This social order is that all people should be healthy and fit. The ultimate goal here is to obtain the "perfect" body. The health industry has become a multi-million dollar market. This new industry focus on the individual's wants which are socially derived. These socially consequent wants range from acceptance to sexual attractiveness. It also includes creating short cuts for people to sculpt the ideal body. These short cuts come in the form of supplements. Often are considered bad for you as some can lead to cancer or other long-term health risks. An example of a risky supplement is Anabolic steroids which are basically lab made male testosterone. This supple is extremely bad for you but why do people take them? Besides prescribed medical reasons people take Anabolic steroids because it will allow to create a muscular body in a matter of weeks not years. There many underlying social reason as why people take them which may vary between person but generally they are peers, sex appeal, trying to emulate sports professionals, personal sports performance and over all social acceptance. Also worth mentioning is that advertising these companies do has an effect on society. Often these companies make many false claims about their product. For example, "I gained 50 pounds of muscle in less than a month!" (mccollon, Oct2004) There are many cases of these short cuts being used all around. For example, though I never took steroids I have used many sorts of supplements to gain an edge and control of my body that produced acceptable results. I felt this example is necessary to show that everyone can be affected by their peers and outside pressures.

The final example of industry is that of a new craze of undergoing surgery to lose weight. Often these surgeries are dangerous and have mixed results. One example is Laparoscopic adjustable gastric banding. What this means is the surgeon places a rubber band around the stomach limiting the volume of food the individual can consume. In a article found in Health & Medicine Week - August 23, 2004. Christine Ferguson had great difficulty losing weight. It affected her self-esteem and how she saw her self at work considering she was the head of Boston Public Health Commission. Although no one came out and said anything while she was over weight they did mention but after she lost 100 pounds they congratulated her progress and mentioned that they felt it was inappropriate for her to be the commissioner when she was so out of shape. This article shows how societies image of beautiful or healthy effects how someone can perform their job not to mention the way they conduct their life.

The media in the writers view is by far the guiltiest of creating the exercise obsession. For years, we have been plagued by cover shots of beautiful men and women. Their figure and features are flawless. It sets the bench market for society to strive for and in due course achieve. It also often creates a poor self image. Often people go to great lengths to become what they idolize spending truck loads of money on the gym memberships and products. In the American journal of health studies in 2003 there was an article published about a high school teen who took supplements just like his idol Mark Mcquire. This example I feel shows how media hype on Mcquires success use steroids effects society. (Mooney, May/June 2003) This

structures a type of socialization that creates a mentor that people young and old look up to. In act to curb such idolization of athlete's use of performance supplements some pro leagues have begun to ban these products, such as the NFL. Not all of communities use these supplements to increase performance and idolize pro athletes. People are using them to appear "ripped". This ideal is socially constructed but is continued through the media and popular culture like men's health magazine and rap videos. Within the mainstream western pop culture the ideal to appear thin and trim is often held above many societal norms like doing school work first.

People frequently base what is attractive from what the media presents through fashion and movies. Often when explaining to friends about someone you just met you compare him or her to someone famous like he kind of looks like Jack Nicholson.

Lastly, the media has flood our TV's with shows about people undergoing surgery or life altering steps to change their appearance and health. This not only reinforces my argument that media creates an obsession but also that it advertises that latest crazes that are not always good for you like quick fix surgeries.

The final issue covered is that of government. In a recent trend the government has shifted its policy from treating disease to preventing disease because of the cost effectiveness. This trend of companioning a healthy life style reinforces the societal norm of what a body should look like. Thus placing societal pressure on those who don't conform and by not conforming you will be labeled a deviant. Often the label of deviant is shed when he or she conforms and performs a healthy course of life.

In closing, the obsession with health in my view is not a bad thing. It is when it is taken to the extreme that it becomes flawed ideal such as exercise addiction. Society is ultimately to blame for this obsession as seen above by casting those who do not conform in shadows. The media often creates the bench mark but it is society that carries it along. The industry is often effected by the typical supple and demand model. With this being said, the demand for such products are fueled by society wants to conform to a social norm of what it is to be fit and healthy.