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**Fad Dieting as a Health Behavior**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Fad dieting in the United States is not uncommon, instead it is heavily prevalent in the lives of most americans. In fact, between 2015 and 2018, more than 17% of american adults reported being on a special diet, the majority of which were weight-loss oriented (Stierman, 2020). Weight-loss diets are highly controversial, with some arguing the benefits of short term weight loss, and others disputing that said diets cannot be maintained and can pose a serious threat to an individual’s health. Given that the United States is facing an obesity pandemic, with roughly 39.6% of adult Americans overweight, it is not surprising that there is a wild variety of diets trending on the internet (Obesity and Overweight, 2020). Weight watchers, paleo, keto… all of these aforementioned diets were created with the intention to help a specific audience. However, with the increase of diet popularity, the exclusive market component is lost, resulting in public approval for highly restrictive, unmanageable diet culture.

Studies have found that dieting may have relations to poor mental and physical health, as well as infertility and illness related to nutrient deficiency (Fayet, 2012). Micronutrients are the vitamins and minerals essential for preventing disease, stable development, and overall well-being (Micronutrient Facts, 2020). The human body cannot make the majority of the required micronutrients, instead they are obtained through the consumption of foods found in our environment. Iron, folate, vitamin A, vitamin D, zinc and iodine are six of the most important nutrients utilized in our bodies (Micronutrient Facts, 2020). Deficiencies in these vitamins and minerals can result in pregnancy complications and an increase in susceptibility to disease (Micronutrient Facts, 2020). Highly restrictive diets can limit an individual’s access to a multitude of micronutrients, lowering their overall health significantly. One of the most controversial diets sweeping the general population in the United States, is the keto diet. Ketogenic diets were first created for the control of Type II diabetes. When an individual does not eat carbohydrates (or eats a very restricted amount), the body utilizes fat for energy instead. This can induce a state called ketosis, where ketones are produced in the blood (Schutz, 2021). The results include rapid weight loss and reduction in blood sugar and insulin levels- ideal for a type II diabetes patient (Evans, 2018). However, a prolonged state of ketosis in an individual who does not suffer from diabetes can have negative consequences on their health. Ketogenic diets are a prime example of how diets can be abused by the unintended audience, involuntarily creating an unhealthy lifestyle.

Nutrition is a fundamental factor in human health. There are many goals regarding nutrient intake as a health behavior in the Healthy People 2030 goals. As stated above, fad dieting and highly restrictive diets can limit nutrient consumption in adults. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is looking to combat this health behavior in their Healthy People 2030 efforts. In terms of nutrition, the Healthy People 2030 initiatives include increasing calcium, potassium, and vitamin D consumption in those aged 2 and over (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion [ODPHP], n.d.). The purpose of these goals are to support all Americans in consuming diets that provide their bodies with the essential micronutrients to remain healthy. Additionally, one of the goals of Healthy People 2030 is to increase the proportion of health care visits by adults with obesity that include counseling on weight loss and nutrition (ODPHP, n.d.). By encouraging adults to receive counseling on weight loss and nutrition, adults may be more inclined to receive knowledge on the dangers of certain fad diets, and instead may apply healthier weight loss strategies.

**THEORY**

Theories are often utilized by individuals within the healthcare community to facilitate behavior modification. Theories look to cognition, or how an individual’s brain processes information to understand how to generate change in their life. Theory is dependent upon constructs, which are identified, highly specific characteristics pertaining to a certain theory. Constructs act as the outline of the elements of the theory, which can then be applied to various behaviors. The Health Belief Model and the Social Cognitive Theory are two theories which can be used to modify unhealthy dieting behavior.

Health Belief Model

A Value Expectancy Theory can be best defined as any theory where behavior is related to the subjective value of the outcome and the subjective probability or expectation that an action will achieve that outcome. One of the most widely used value expectancy theories in the world of human health behaviors includes the Health Belief Model (HBM). The Health Belief Model is extremely broad, and includes many components relating to behaviorist and cognitive psychology; with prominence regarding the decision-making process. The HBM consists of various constructs, beginning with the notion that people will take action against a bad health habit if they are perceived to be susceptible. The HBM also emphasizes that the individual believes the consequences are severe, he/she thinks that taking some action will result in benefits, there are few barriers to action, cues to action exist and that he/she can change the outcome through self-efficacy (Hayden, 2009). The Health Belief Model can be used in relation to ‘fad dieting’ to understand the perceptions of fad dieting behavior; including perceived susceptibility of the consequences of a highly restrictive diet and the perceived severity relating to those consequences. Researchers also implement the HBM to look at the barriers and benefits related to fad dieting, such as body image and diagnosed disordered eating. The final segment of the HBM is the notion of self-efficacy, or that an individual who once participated in highly restrictive dieting now believes that he/she has the power to eat a more balanced diet.

Dieting can take many forms and oftentimes is unique to each individual’s life. Some diets are more restrictive than others, and some people choose to follow their diet more closely than their peers, causing diet disparities. The Mediterranean diet is a culturally-based diet, mimicking the diet of those individuals living along the Mediterranean Sea. The diet typically consists of olive oil as a primary fat source, along with an abundance of fruits, vegetables, beans, nuts and seeds, with dairy intake limited. The U.S. News and Annual Report on society’s best diets tend to rank the Mediterranean diet as one of the healthiest dieting options available (What is the Mediterranean Diet, 2020). Given that the Mediterranean diet has gained so much attention in recent years, researchers have conducted a study applying the HBM to women of childbearing age on the Mediterranean diet. The researchers first asked women to report on the barriers and benefits of the Mediterranean diet, which they then followed up with an educational session on nutrition and the mediterranean diet as an influence pregnancy and their child’s health. The study primarily focused on the perceived benefits and barriers constructs, which were previously defined as the notion that an individual may be more likely to partake in a behavior if the perceived benefits outweigh the perceived barriers. Researchers found that the perceived benefits included “appearance and disease prevention.” Whereas the primary barrier to following the Mediterranean diet was a lack of nutritional education, with most women reporting that they would be less inclined to use olive oil as a primary fat source, due to the stigma surrounding olive oil as an unhealthy food (Kretowicz, 2018). Other barriers that were discussed include the impact of their partner, with most women stating that they would be less likely to participate in the diet if their partner was not participating in it. In addition, the diet does require some culinary skills (as the food is non-processed), which did pose as an issue with the diet for some women. With the conclusion of the study, the researchers found that most women did experience some self-efficacy with the diet, they felt that they did have the power to modify their diet to a mediterranean-style, and that it would create benefits for both themselves and their baby. In this example, the HBM was utilized to support the Mediterranean diet, facilitating a diet change in women of childbearing years.

Social Cognitive Theory

Like the Health Belief Model, the Social Cognitive Theory is a theory that researchers utilize to implement change in an individual’s life through various constructs. The Social Cognitive Theory can be broken down into four concepts. These concepts include self-regulation, reciprocal determinism, social influence and cognitions. The theory also includes a multiple of constructs: self-efficacy, behavioral capability, expectations, expectancies, self-regulation, locus of control, vicarious learning, reinforcements and social norms (Hayden, 2009). The role of the environment is heavily emphasized in Social Cognitive Theory, especially looking at how the environment influences behavior and personality.

As previously discussed, unhealthy dieting patterns in adolescents can lead to disordered eating and a problematic relationship with food. The Social Cognitive Theory is often applied into the lives of those struggling with their diet- sometimes due to an intense caloric deficit brought on by highly restrictive dieting practices. In 2016, a study was conducted in Korea surrounding food safety and nutrition, targeting middle through high school aged students. The purpose of this study was to create an educational model based on the Social Cognitive Theory to educate students on healthy eating patterns. Prior to implementing the model, researchers found that “45% of female students have attempted to lose weight in the past 30 days, and a portion of them used unhealthy weight control methods, such as fasting;” primarily due to body image concerns (Lee, 2016). The educational model that was created focuses on the individual’s behavior, more specifically the environmental, personal and behavioral factors (as corresponding to the social cognitive theory). To implement the theory, researchers developed a textbook, a teacher’s guidebook and posters to be hung throughout the nutrition education classroom. The textbook applied the three areas of reciprocal determinism. The *personal* factors included outcome expectations, expectancies and self-efficacy. It is important to note that the report utilized the caffeine element as an example to apply the theory (though the textbook did analyze all of the six nutrition-based components to a diet). In terms of outcome expectations, a decreased amount of caffeine consumed would prevent the negative effects of caffeine consumption, such as arrhythmias and high blood pressure. Outcome expectancies would be the greater value students place on their health versus energy due to caffeine. Self-efficacy was a key part of the textbook, where students explained the adverse effects of caffeine through role playing. The *behavioral* concepts were then analyzed in terms of caffeine. Behavioral capability involved a class activity where students learned to check the content of caffeine in beverages. Self-control consisted of a textbook checkpoint where students observed their own caffeine intake throughout the day. Finally, posters were utilized to change the student’s *environment* (Lee, 2016). The Social Cognitive Theory was implemented in a Korean school system to better educate its students on nutrition, essentially modifying their behavior to limit the participation in calorie restrictive dieting.

**INTRAPERSONAL FACTORS**

Intrapersonal factors are the cognitions within an individual relating to health behaviors. Intrapersonal means “within the person.” The intrapersonal level refers to individual characteristics, more specifically knowledge, attitudes, values, beliefs, personality, skills and personal history. Oftentimes, the root of fad dieting can be due to an individual’s perspective.

Biological sex is a key contributor when studying fad dieting at the intrapersonal level. Gender is a defining characteristic for most individuals. Gender is oftentime compared when analyzing health behaviors. When relating male and female participation in highly restrictive dieting, females tend to partake in fad dieting trends more than their male counterparts. A research study was conducted aiming to answer one question: who diets? Prior to performing the study, researchers gathered information based on previous studies. They found that women consistently dieted more than men (de Ridder, 2014). The actual study included a questionnaire about the participant’s eating habits, as well as a week-long snack log to determine their caloric intake. To determine which participants were on a diet, the Restraint Eating Scale was utilized. This method is from the Dutch Eating Behavior Questionnaire. The Restraint Eating Scale consists of ten questions asking about diet, which are then ranked on a 5 point scale. The average score for all participants was a 2.81, with females having a mean score of 2.99 and males having a mean score of 2.58 (de Ridder, 2014). Based on these results, it was possible for the researchers to conclude that women are more likely to participate in diets than men. Thus, gender is an important intrapersonal factor.

Aside from involuntary intrapersonal levels, an individual’s beliefs and knowledge is an important factor when it comes to fad dieting. Many people engage in restrictive dieting behavior because they do not have all the facts about the effects of the diet on the human body. False information about fad diets is often promoted on social media or in magazines/books/television, etc. This then causes individuals to have certain beliefs that these diets could be beneficial, when they are in fact dangerous. According to Dr. Karen Morin, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, any individual interested in trying a new diet should talk to their healthcare provider first (Morin, 2013). Dr. Morin also states that a healthy individual needs a variety of foods in moderation, which most fad diets inhibit due to their highly restrictive nature. By talking to a doctor before attempting a new diet, the individual can be sure to have all the information about its effects, thus obtaining more knowledge to create new beliefs about dieting trends.

**INTERPERSONAL FACTORS**

Unlike intrapersonal factors, interprsonal factors are those based on an individual’s surroundings and the beliefs of the people around them. The interpersonal level includes the influences from relationships with other people, such as family, friends and co-workers or school peers. Many people choose to participate in a diet because they heard about it from someone they know, or they saw the diet being promoted on social media or television.

Social media is a vast platform for promoting unsafe diet practices. It is not uncommon for diet creators to pay influencers to promote their product for dozens of impressionable adolescents to see- and believe. The ‘thin ideal’ is a concept that is embedded in our society, it is the belief that skinny is the ideal body type, and our society’s definition of beauty. Social media emphasizes the ‘thin ideal’ through its encouragement of fad diets- whether it be detox teas or lollipops that evade hunger. Ysabel Gerrard is a lecturer in digital media at a university in the United Kingdom. Recently, Gerrard has been working with major media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook to create a software that will block users under the age of eighteen from viewing posts that promote unhealthy eating behaviors (Rosenbloom, 2019). Gerrard hopes to expand the program to ban any posts that are related to private sellers promising products with magical weight loss results, as adolescents are not the only group that fall victim to the diet trends. The program would also include a way for users to report these types of posts in an easier manner. Many people are pushing for the end of diet promotion on social media, due to its heavy influence on society. In a study conducted in 2016, researchers found that high social media usage has a direct correlation to increased body image insecurity and eating disorder engagement (Sidani, 2016). Though efforts are being made to halt ‘miracle diets,’ social media continues to play a massive role in promoting fad diet culture.

Another interpersonal factor that affects food consumption is family. Typically, it is the parents and guardians responsibility to feed their children. Therefore, it is up to the parents to decide what diet trends their family will participate in. Once a child is able to feed themselves, typically they continue to mimic what their parents have cooked for them. Diet is extremely impressionable and the habits placed on children at a young age tend to continue into their adulthood. Restrictive dieting in children however, tends to have a contrary effect. Scientists conducted a study in which they observed dietary behavior of children who only had access to “healthy” foods, compared to those who had access to a range of food types. The results showed that when the kids on a restrictive diet were presented with sweets, they tended to binge eat compared to those who always had access to the sweets (Rollins, 2014). The probable explanation for this outcome is due to the fact that when children are repressed from “unhealthy foods” they feel the urge to consume large amounts when they are in the presence of it- for fear of it being taken away. However, children who are always in the presence of a wide variety of foods can eat the “unhealthy foods” as they wish. Most people are highly influenced by their family, especially young children who- for the most part- solely rely on their family for their diet.

**ORGANIZATIONAL, COMMUNITY, ENVIRONMENT AND**

**PUBLIC POLICY FACTORS**

The presence of unhealthy fad diets has also expanded away from the individual level, to larger groups such as the organizational and community levels. Oftentimes, fad diets are promoted in many aspects of everyday life. Modern society tends to place heavy emphasis on body image, infiltrating most areas of daily life including the institutions of which we are a part of. Researchers have found that constant dieting can lead to the onset of eating disorders, especially when an individual becomes hyper focused on BMI and self image. One of the most influential times in an individual’s life, is his/her’s first experience with personal freedom, such as when an adolescent enters university for the first time. In a study conducted among various college students, college women reported their eating habits using a 51 question electronic questionnaire, known as the Eating Inventory. In the study, the researchers found that 43% of college women reported to be on a diet, despite the fact that 78% had a healthy BMI (Fayet, 2012). The study concluded that while a great deal of nutritional information is available to college aged women, more education is necessary to prevent restrictive diets within this population. With a greater percentage of college women on diets compared to women who are not in college on diets, it is possible to assume that there is a correlation between the university and a female college student’s mindset on food. Many researchers offer the fact that many women’s bodies change in their freshman year as an explanation as to why more university students choose to diet.

In addition to the organizational level, fad dieting and unhealthy eating patterns are often promoted in the social media community. While it can be argued that social media has brought many contributions to society, one of its more negative effects is the constant comparison most people feel when they scroll through their social media feeds. Typically, people only post pictures or videos of themselves where they look their best- resulting in their viewers constantly comparing themselves to the individual on the screen. Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat… all these social media applications are notorious for creating a toxic environment relating to body image. Given that young adults are highly impressionable and social media lacks regulation, it is not uncommon for fad diet creators and companies to use celebrity advocacy to gain popularity. In a mixed method study conducted in Australia, researchers aimed to understand the relationship between social media and body image perspective. Researchers analyzed and coded six databases looking for connections between social media interactions (liking, commenting, posting) and presentation of image-content related to body image. The analysis resulted in 30 entries, where researchers found that social media engagement had a direct impact on unhappiness with one’s body, and susceptibility to participate in a ‘trendy’ or ‘fad’ diet (Rounsefell, 2020). The researchers also discovered a pattern between social media users and nutrition, resulting in a five step behavior sequence that most observed individuals participated in. First, researchers found that social media generates a comparative mindset. With this comparative mindset, individuals will then be more aware of their feelings surrounding their own body. In turn, individuals may be more likely to alter their image to fit their ideal body image. Consequently, resulting in unhealthy eating behaviors to finally achieve validation on social media platforms (Rounsefell, 2020). Based on the findings in this study, it can be reasonable to conclude that the social media community has the ability to entice an individual to participate in restrictive dieting to achieve a certain body image.

An individual’s environment, or their day to day surroundings, can play a large role in their responsiveness to highly restrictive dieting. Previously, dieting amongst college women was examined, focusing on the university as an organization itself. However, the physical environment at the university, such as dormitory living has also been shown to directly affect dietary choices. Peer influence is a large contributor to disordered eating among college students. The majority of college students have at least one roommate, where they share the same home environment. Typically, when a student first arrives at college, he/she tends to stick close to their roommate- at least at first. It is not uncommon for similar eating patterns to develop, especially if most meals are being shared on a daily basis. A study was conducted at Northeastern University, where 800 women were asked about their roommate’s dieting behaviors and their own personal eating habits. Their self-reported data was then compared to the Eating Disorder Inventory Drive (EDI) to identify a possible connection. Researchers found positive associations between individuals with weight control eating patterns (such as fad diets/eating disorders) and the presence of friends with severe dieting practices (Keel, 2013). Eating habits are highly pliable in one’s life, especially during times of personal growth and development. Roommates can often create an environment which fosters unhealthy eating habits, especially if it is promoted as a ‘healthy’ or ‘safe’ way to lose weight.

The broadest level of the social ecological model consists of public policy. Public policy refers to social structures implemented in society, typically by government-level organizations. The Food and Drug Administration is a sector of the U.S. government that ensures public health by controlling food and drug supply. In 1994, the Dietary Supplement Act was passed which stated that the FDA does not have to regulate the passage of dietary supplements into the drug marketplace (Cohen, 2012). The FDA does have some control however, as this agency remains the right to remove any supplement that is deemed dangerous, or mismatches the information on the label.

The United States has a vicious past with the presence of Rainbow Pills. Beginning with their creation in the 1940s, multiple U.S. pharmaceutical companies aggressively promoted the use of colorful weight loss pills, known as Rainbow Pills. These pills dominated the market, until dangerous side effects emerged, including dozens of deaths in the 1960s. Since then, Rainbow Pills have been banned, until recently when some researchers were made aware of diet pills that are extremely similar to the historical Rainbow Pills. With the passage of the Dietary Supplement Act of 1994, Rainbow Pills were able to successfully reenter the drug market under the disguise of herbal weight loss pills (Cohen, 2012). Similar side effects including abdominal pain, tachycardia and vomiting have been observed. The lack of regulation of diet drugs protected through public policy has promoted the existence of diet fads, by allowing dangerous pills to circulate our markets targeting those individuals who hope to lose weight in an unhealthy manner.

**SUGGESTIONS FOR INTERVENTION**

Participation in highly restrictive dieting behaviors can have detrimental effects on the individual, which can be corrected through interventive methods. Motivational interviewing is the process by which motivational influences are examined and ambivalence is controlled (Loughran, 2021). An individual experiences ambivalence when he/she has the desire to change, at the same time possessing the feeling to not change. Various methods are utilized in motivational interviewing, the most common including detachment, empathy, listening and empowerment. An individual who is practicing fad dieting patterns may be more inclined to change their behavior if they have access to a counselor or friend who is engaging in motivational interviewing techniques, especially if their motivator is trained in responding to sustain talk.

Arguably the most common strategy for behavior modification, is the use of educational methods. By increasing the knowledge an individual has regarding a certain behavior, it may make him/her more inclined to change their habits. Nutrition is a prime example of this. Many people participate in fad diets because they get drawn in by the desire to drop a few pounds, but very few people actually research the diet before beginning. By educating individuals on human nutrition (such as macros, calorie intake, vitamin requirements, etc.) they may be more likely to decline participation in fad diets which do not meet nutritional needs. In addition to educating, screening is an important strategy for behavior modification regarding highly restrictive diets. Restrictive diets are a concern because they are often the beginning of eating disorders. Studies show that restrictive diets foster a highly controlling mindset, which is the primary motivator behind disordered eating. In an observational study in the Journal of the American Psychiatric Nurses Association, researchers identify screening in general clinical settings as one of the best modes of intervention for disordered eating (Owens, 2021). Screening can be beneficial as an intervention method because it can identify certain fad dieting behavior as an undiagnosed ED, thus allowing the patient to seek treatment and help before the ED manifests itself in other areas of the patient’s life. Overall, screening can allow an individual to explore the various treatment options available for eating disorders and unhealthy relationships with food.

As mentioned previously, body image is a large component of fad diet promotion and practice. Many women in modern society feel compelled to engage in fad diets to uphold various ‘beauty standards.’ The Women’s Body Initiative (WBI) was created to provide intervention methods for women struggling with body image insecurities, and turning to unhealthy diet practices (Verzijl, 2021). The study included four, one-hour long sessions, conducted once a week. At a 3 month follow up, the researchers were able to conclude that the Women’s Body Initiative did serve as a successful intervention method, as women reported feeling more confident and content with their body image. Less women reported participation in fad diets. The WBI was a successful intervention method for the hindrance of fad dieting.

There are many different strategies that can be utilized to promote change in an individual. However, behavior change is only effective once the motivation becomes intrinsic. Education, counseling, the WBI, and most of the other aforementioned behavior modification strategies are extrinsic motivators. The switch to a healthy lifestyle and nontoxic relationship with food only arises once the individual is intrinsically motivated. Once an individual has the information, or possesses the facts surrounding nutrient uptake, calorie maintenance, etc. then he or she is more likely to stray away from fad diets and highly restrictive eating patterns. The end goal of the intervention methods must result in self-efficacy and the self-belief that he or she is able to maintain their changed behavior.

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