

## **Diet Culture and the Holidays**

Diet culture is ubiquitous and around the winter holidays it seems especially prevalent. It can be easy to get caught up in its messaging regardless of if you have an eating disorder or not. The holidays are supposed to be a joyful season but diet culture is sneaky and can impact our relationship with our bodies and with food.

We are exposed to diet culture everywhere we look. We see ads for calorie counting apps online, we see weight loss “transformations” when scrolling Instagram and we see gyms and other businesses taking advantage of the parts of our bodies we have been taught to feel insecure about.

## **Why Is Diet Culture Problematic?**

One of the reasons holiday dieting is problematic is because it can lead to what is called The Dieter’s Dilemma. This happens when we get in the diet mentality and restrict certain foods or do not let ourselves eat until satisfaction. When we restrict food, cravings naturally increase until eventually we “break” the diet. We then may over-indulge on these foods later and feel guilt and shame. After “breaking” the diet you might feel like you lack willpower and discipline. This can lead to a vicious cycle that can make us less in tune with our body's needs. By giving ourselves unconditional permission to eat we can interrupt the cycle or prevent it from ever starting.

## **How can I Avoid Engaging in Diet Culture?**

The first step to avoiding diet culture behaviors is knowing how to identify them. Diet culture can look like swapping favorite foods for the “healthy” or “lite” choice or avoiding them all together. It can look like engaging in excessive exercise to “earn” a meal or treat. It can also look like making negative comments about one’s food choices or body, or having a “last supper” mentality and promising to be “good” tomorrow, next week, or next year. Diet culture is a 64.7 Billion dollar industry that profits off of our insecurities, bodies, and desire to be healthy. You can avoid diet culture by remembering these companies do not really have your best interest at heart. Remember that food is supposed to be pleasurable. Look into a weight neutral approach to health to learn more about creating healthy habits without weight loss as a goal.

## **Set Boundaries with Others**

If you notice people around you are body-bashing or participating in diets or food rules, gently ask them to refrain from talking about it in front of you. If triggering topics come up, don't hesitate to change the conversation to something you are more comfortable discussing. Another option is to politely excuse yourself from the room until the conversation is over. Not everyone is ready for an anti-diet approach and many people don't even know it's an option. We are all on different paths to self-love and it is important to respect what other people choose to do with their bodies.

## **Stop Labeling food as "Good" or "Bad"**

Food doesn't have morality. Eating vegetables does not make you a good person and eating pie does not make you bad. By viewing all food as equal you take guilt out of the equation and can instead enjoy your meal and the company of your loved ones.

## **Be Flexible**

For many, the holidays are the busiest time of the year. Things don't always go as planned and that's okay. You might miss a workout or have to rearrange your meal plan. There is nothing wrong with choosing to spend more time with loved ones or resting instead of exercising. Friends may spontaneously meet up for brunch or deliver cookies and it's important to let yourself enjoy those special moments.

## **Try Body Neutrality**

Body neutrality is the practice of appreciating the body for its functions rather than its appearance. For some, body positivity (loving your body as it looks, flaws and all) can seem far too daunting to attempt. Body neutrality is a less intimidating step toward body acceptance. Practice body neutrality by picking a body part and appreciating what it does for you. For example, "I love my arms because they allow me to hug my friends" or "I love my face because I can show emotion and talk to others" or even "I love my shoulders because they allow me to wear my favorite sweatshirt". Body neutrality acknowledges that you may not love every single part of yourself and that's okay. It provides us the opportunity to make room for more positive thoughts about our bodies and less room for body-shame and hate.

## **Practice Self-care**

If you do find yourself busier than normal this winter, please don't forget to set aside some time for yourself. Traveling, staying up late, and challenging family relationships can be stressful and anxiety-inducing. Things as simple as reading a book, listening to music, using a coloring book, or working on a puzzle can be effective stress relievers. Taking time to relax, have a bubble bath, or do some other self-care activity can take your mind off diet culture and help you practice self-care.

If you have a loved one who is struggling with an eating disorder or disordered thoughts and is not yet in treatment, please get them help. There is no such thing as not being "sick enough". Eating disorders are treated with a combination of therapy, nutrition education, and medical care. Reach out to [info@mindbodycoopchicago.com](mailto:info@mindbodycoopchicago.com) and learn more about our dietitian Grace, who wrote this blog!