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The Freshman 15: The Who, What, and How it Harms Us

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Episode 1

Intro

Welcome to the very first episode of **The Freshman 15: The Who, What, and How it Harms Us.** I am your host, Eva VanWyck. In this episode, we will be covering what "the freshman 15" is, the history of its origins, and the reality of the term. We will dive deep into why this term affects freshmen and the unique stressors of the transition from high school to college. Does the freshman 15 really exist? Let's find out.

What is "The Freshman 15"?

The freshman 15 is a widely believed phenomenon that college and university freshmen gain around 15 pounds in their first year. This weight gain has been attributed to a lack of exercise, often unlimited access to dining hall foods, and excessive drinking.

Public awareness

The idea of the freshman 15 is very well known across the US. It has been a topic of conversation and a frequent joke for at least the past 5 decades. The term is easily found in high schools as seniors prepare to graduate and continues to be heard all across college campuses today.
Class after class, generation after generation, the idea that freshmen will likely gain 15 pounds has been accepted and largely unquestioned by students, their families, and college and university administration.

I sat down with current students and faculty on Grand Valley State University's Campus to get the pulse on students' experiences and feelings about the freshman 15. Grand Valley is a public university in west Michigan with a student population of 22,000. The freshman class is made up of around 4,000 students every fall.

I spoke to Dr. Anna Hammersmith, a professor of sociology at GVSU.

I spoke to Dr. Pam Miller, a licensed and board certified psychologist as well as the associate director and director of training and the GVSU university counseling center.

I spoke to Dr. Jennifer Stewart, A professor of sociology at GVSU. She opted not to be recorded for this episode so I will be sharing her words.

> "I've definitely heard of the freshman 15. I probably first heard about it, when I went to college, which would have been not long after that term became popularized. I think I started Michigan State in 1989. So yeah, it was probably pretty close to that time. And honestly, I don't remember, worrying about it in any way. But I grew up around women who were always weighing themselves and always on diets, and I just never wanted to be that concerned. So, to this day, I mean, I probably weigh myself once a year. And that's when I go for an annual checkup at the doctor. It was a thing I did not want to be obsessed with just having seen what it did to all of the women in the family and that I was surrounded by, even friends. I mean, I'm sure you know that the statistics suggest that, depending on what data set you look at, 40 to

> 60% of fourth graders have dieted, whatever that means to them. And so I do remember in high school, and I do remember in college, my roommates and friends always talking about being fat, or this or that no one was, you know, it was so silly, but I definitely remember just not wanting to have to live that way in terms of what I saw with the women in my family."

I spoke to Dr. Rachel Campbell, a professor of sociology at GVSU.

I spoke to Michelle a college senior.

Who coined the phrase?

You may be surprised to learn the term "The Freshman 15" has no roots in health or medicine. It was actually arbitrarily made up by Seventeen Magazine in the late 1980s. Seventeen Magazine is a teen magazine in the US, it was established in 1944. The magazine features content on fashion, pop culture, dating, and various other topics relevant to its target audience of 13 to 19 year olds who identify as female. The magazine has long fearmongered weight gain and promoted diet culture to their audience of mostly adolescent girls. Seventeen has been talking about freshman weight gain for decades. In March 1977 the cover issue was "How to Avoid Freshman Weight Gain." 7 years later a similar article ran in October titled "Fight Freshman Fat." In 1988 The infamous term was coined in an internal article, and the next year the article was re-run on the cover with the title "Fighting the Freshman 15"

So what is the reality of the freshman 15? Is it simply a catchy alliteration or a real phenomenon? To answer this let's go back to research conducted around the same time the term was first used.

The reality of freshman weight gain

A research study was conducted in 1985 on weight gain in freshman women by Hovell and colleagues. The authors of this study found an average weight gain of just over 8 pounds in university women living on campus. First-year students that were not living on campus were found to have gained less than 1 pound on average. So even when Seventeen Magazine first coined the phrase, the reality of first-year weight gain was drastically lower than 15 pounds.

Findings from recent research suggest this number has dropped by more than half. Research indicates anywhere from 51 to 72 percent of freshman gain weight in their first year. But the average amount of weight gained was just over 1 pound to 4 and a half pounds. An even further cry from the 15 pounds young people are warned about. It is important to note that Freshman weight gain is often thought to affect mostly women but research has found it affects students from all demographics fairly equally. Yet differences between women and men are not regularly observed, neither are differences between students of different races or socioeconomic classes.

Despite this reality, the shame and fear of weight gain persists. A study by Bailey and colleagues found through student interviews that women in particular feared weight gain. Some women even noted that their biggest fear was gaining the freshman 15. This fear was linked with dieting and taking other harmful actions to stave off weight gain. This gets to the heart of another much more dangerous phenomenon, disordered eating. Some students, especially those with a history of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating, fear gaining weight in their first year at university so much that they engage in

unhealthy behaviors to lose weight. A study by Gropper and colleagues from 2020 found that 28.5 percent of the 214 freshman students they studied lost weight in their first semester. When body composition was analyzed they found the students had lost muscle mass and their overall percent body fat mass had actually increased. The results signified that participants had not lost weight in a healthy manner.

Why I'm talking about it?

I am making this podcast, in part, because I was one of the freshman students whose fear of the freshman 15 led to an unhealthy relationship with food. I want to dive deeper into the truth of the freshman 15 and dismantle the belief that it can be used as a harmless comment or even a joke.

Why freshmen?

So why do we talk so much about freshmen specifically? As I mentioned earlier in the episode the common culprits for freshman weight gain are a lack of exercise, unlimited access to campus foods, and excessive drinking. But these are problems any age of student on campus could struggle with. They are not unique to freshmen, so what sets freshmen apart?

Well, to start we need to establish that there are many factors that influence our health, some we can control and some we cannot. To learn more about the many things that impact our health I sat down with Dr. Anna Hammersmith, a sociology professor at grand valley state university, to discuss the social determinants of health and their impact on freshmen.

Dr. Hammersmith interview

Transition - How this time is tough

So we know our health is determined by numerous factors that we may or may not be able to change. When we think about the transition from high school to freshman year, many aspects of people's lives are changing rapidly, which can impact their health and wellbeing. They are moving to a new unfamiliar environment, their support network of friends and family may be farther away and they establish new relationships, they have access to different food and transportation, and so on and so on. This makes this period of time a particularly difficult one, especially for students who relocated to attend college and are farther from home.

In late adolescence, also called emerging adulthood, young people's brains are still developing rapidly and are more sensitive to stress. When transitioning to college there are tons of potential stressors that may affect student well-being. They are developing independence and starting to navigate their lives on their own. Students living on campus are no longer living with their family or guardians. They are solely responsible for their time management and the new demands that come with higher education coursework. Some students may need to develop new study skills very rapidly or may struggle to study at the level required to do well in their courses. Additionally, some students may also be working part-time and juggling that responsibility along with all their other commitments. All of these new challenges can be very stressful. Heightened stress may impact some freshmen's ability to thrive and make things like eating healthy and getting enough physical activity even harder.

One factor that predicts this stress, as indicated through a wealth of research, is student preparedness. Students who are more prepared for college are more likely to interpret the transition to college as positive, and students who are less prepared a more likely to struggle. This is good news, it shows us we can lessen that stress and take control of our own health, particularly by ensuring we are college-ready. There are other factors that can ease this transition as well, like making friends on campus. And this can be tough, especially if you are struggling to manage other responsibilities. But getting involved or even going to a few events on campus can be a great start and a way to cut back on stress.

All the stress and struggles of this transition affect the choices we make and our ability to prioritize our own health. And yes, it's true, this can influence weight. During freshman year many people gain a few pounds, and some actually lose weight at unhealthy rates. But, as we saw earlier, the freshman 15 actually doesn't really exist. We know that the narrative around why and how freshmen gain weight is exaggerated. So why do Freshman gain a few pounds, if not for the reasons we have been told? There are 2 reasons we are going to dig into right now that can answer the question: Why freshman? The answers to this relates to physical growth and mental health.

<u>Still growing</u>

Physical growth can in part explain the common weight gain we see in first-year students. Shockingly most studies that measure the freshman 15 don't record changes in student height. So if you grow a few inches and your weight increases accordingly, some studies will falsely record that as solely being unhealthy weight gain, instead of what it is: Completely normal adolescent growth. This is particularly true for men, who often continue to grow and mature later than women. It is common for men to continue to grow throughout college and with increases in height come increases in weight. One included study by Gropper and colleagues, completed in 2009, recorded small but significant increases in height throughout freshman year.

I sat down with Dr. Pam Miller, a licensed and board-certified psychologist as well as the associate director and director of training and the Grand Valley State University counseling center to discuss student growth and the impact of body image on mental health.

Dr. Miller interview

This period in development, adolescence, is full of physical and social changes that all can affect health and weight. But there is another factor that also plays a huge role, mental health.

<u>Mental Health in adolescence</u>

There are lots of ways mental health affects freshmen, I am going to focus primarily on disordered eating. The weight loss recorded during freshman year is often not healthy weight changes, but the act of eating practices that could be classified as or lead to disordered eating. Adolescence is the time when most eating disorders develop. Emerging adulthood represents the life stage with the most significant surge in eating disorders, when students with existing disordered eating practices may struggle more with their relationship with food without the support of family and friends and the added pressures of starting college.

In my conversation with Dr. Miller, we spoke about how the freshman 15 impacts student mental health.

Dr. Miller interview

This is a critical period of development where young people experience rapid changes and unique stressors. Students amid this transition may experience heightened stress, poorer sleep, less physical activity due to a busy schedule, and difficulty navigating how to make healthy decisions about food on their own. It is true these factors can influence weight. The transition to college or independent living can be hard for some. For students who do gain weight in their first year most gain weight occurs at the beginning of the year when the transition is most dramatic and rapid. But as we have discussed this is a small change in weight for most students. So why do we use the exaggerated term "freshman 15" to fearmonger and shame students? In short, because our society is terrified of gaining weight.

Up Next

In the next episode, we will unpack the stigma surrounding weight changes and the culture of fatphobia in the US. Until then remember, the weight gain of freshman fame? Yeah that's built on fear and weight shame. See ya in the next one.

Credits

Special thanks to Dr. Anna Hammersmith, Dr. Pam Miller, Dr. Jennifer Stewart, Dr. Rachel Campbell, and our student interviewees for their insight and time. I would also like to thank the Fredrick Meijer Honors College for their support and for providing audio equipment. This has been The Freshman 15: The Who, What, and How it Harms Us, Thank you for listening. This episode contains 51 scholarly sources, these can be found in the episode notes.

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Episode 2

Intro

Welcome back to **The Freshman 15: The Who, What, and How it Harms Us.** I am your host, Eva VanWyck. In this episode, we will cover the stigma around weight and food in the US. We will delve into the fat phobia embedded into our society and the harm it causes. These topics directly relate to the exaggeration known as the freshman 15 by telling students thinness has more societal value and that increases in weight are shameful and embarrassing.

The stigma around eating and weight gain

For students who do gain weight in their first year, there is often a lot of shame surrounding their weight change. Some folks feel like they have personally failed or that they should try and hide the fact their body has changed. This shame is often internalized and not talked about freely. We are going to dig into how shame affects how we choose and feel about foods with Dr. Jennifer Stewart, Professor of Sociology and Grand Valley State University.

Dr. Stewart interview

Dr. Stewart opted not to be recorded, so I will be sharing her words. I first asked Dr. Stewart what factors influence our choices around food and which foods we deem good or bad. She replied:

"In my sociology of food class. One of the things we talk about and read about is food marketers. And so food marketing, if we look at 1900s on, it's advertising food products to a specific segment of society, white middle-class women. So women of color, are not the targets of food advertising until really late 1960s, early 70s. Men aren't the targets because of that essentialized notion that food work is women's work. But marketers were very manipulative and insidious because what they did was they looked at psychological research. And what they tried to do was both play on women's anxieties, middle class white women's anxieties, and suggest that they had the product that would make sure that the thing that you fear would never happen. And so the thing that was never going to happen, if you bought their product, was that you were never going to spend your life alone, you were going to find a husband, he was going to love you, you were going to have kids, they were going to love you. And it was all to say, Okay, you have this anxiety about never being loved, Never being married, never having kids. And a lot of that has to do with there's a lot of economic insecurity for women, right? So there aren't these job options out there. And so, it's not only a social and psychological threat, it's an economic threat. And so, then they say we have the exact product for you. But it's not just food marketing, right, and all of those 17 and Tiger beat and Vogue, and Cosmo and glamour, they're doing the same thing, right? So they're kind of cultivating or heightening that anxiety about not being liked or loved or pretty or popular. And then here's all the products that will make sure you are, but they can't ever let the anxiety go away totally, because that's the marketing. That is what those magazines exist for, selling you things. And it's all fictional, right? Because we know that the overwhelming majority of people who diet and who do lose weight, at some point gain it back, if not more. We live in a culture of fear about everything. I think the freshman 15, that's stimulating that culture of fear. It's a particular fear that you're going to be fat, right. But we have a culture of fear everywhere. people with a little bit of nutrition information are

sometimes the most dangerous people to know, because they don't know what they're talking about. But they'll pull this little factoid, and piece it together and all of a sudden, you have orthorexia. The fear of any food that is not clean, natural. You get the raw food diet? You get the I am gonna eat like cave people, by the way, cave people's life expectancy was like 24 years of age. So maybe I don't know. But it's trying to induce control over health over identity presentation itself. we often see obesity in in mainstream society as being indicative of bad choices. But we see poverty is being indicative of bad choices without recognizing that by definition, poverty is the absence of choices. And that it's okay at times for food to be comfort. There's nothing wrong with food being pleasurable. There's nothing wrong with food being comforting. There's nothing wrong with food being how you show love. Now, can these things go awry? Of course they can. But because food is really about community, if you forget that, that that's when I think things go awry. And it's really again about the marketing."

I shared with Dr. Stewart that I took basic nutrition as part of my coursework. My professor said, there's no point in eating something if it's not whole wheat, or whole grain, there's no point in eating. And that scared me, I would spend like 45 minutes in the bread aisle reading every single loaf of bread. And for like a good 4 months I kept doing that. But one day I realized this is silly. Like why am I standing here reading every loaf of bread, trying to find the one or two that's considered "good"

Her response was "And that's it. And I think that those kinds of statements like you could find on every day of the week, right? And so of course, it terrifies people. And it also taps back into that whole morality piece, right? So if you want to be healthy, you will listen to me and if you get sick, I told you what to eat. That is the most damaging thing. And also again, probably pretty ignorant. I mean, because I think there are so many different ways to eat well and healthy. But when I say eat well and healthy, I mean, so much more than the nutritional content. Right? And again, it's for me, a lot of it is about that joy, that connection. Right? And, I mean, that's there's a pretty good evolutionary argument to be made that family formation is because human beings are useless at feeding themselves until they're like what five, maybe, you know, but that's societies built around food. And so to have all of these just constant and terrifying messages about food, you know, It makes it easy for us to not listen to ourselves, right . sometimes that whole bag of chips is fine. You know, if it's what you need. Now, do I agree it's probably not a great idea every day. Sure. But yeah, we've just taken so much of the joy out."

The shame around weight gain and food choices is prevalent but for some it can feed into a darker cycle. Shame can spark or worsen patterns of control and restriction surrounding food and even lead to an eating disorder. Societally, we can worsen or delegitimize the experiences of eating disorders through common stigma. Assuming that an unhealthy relationship with food is a personal shortcoming, or that they are a way to gain control in life is very limiting and untrue. This stigma can act as a barrier to seeking help for disordered eating as well. Because students may fear the judgment and stigma from their community and close relationships.

Societally we tie stigma to many aspects of food and eating. We ascribe food morals like bad and good. And in doing so we imply that if you eat "bad" foods or "junk" foods you are automatically unhealthy. Think of a time someone was offered a desert and responded something like "I'm trying to be good

today" or "I'll have one, I will be bad." Let's deep dive into food morality and how it is socially constructed.

Dr. Stewart interview

In my conversations with Dr. Stewart I asked her how food morality arose in US society. Her response was:

"Well, I mean, okay, so as a sociologist, when it comes to looking at the body and stigma, there are very clear ties to race and racism, sex and sexism, and to social class. In other words, part of this stigma is about who we stereotype as, say, obese for example. And it starts at a moment when the dominant scientific - and I use the air quotes intentionally - perspective on race was eugenics. Right? And so race is biologically real, and race is not only about what we look like in terms of skin color, and facial features, and all that stuff. But it's also about abilities or their absence of intelligence, workability, you know, that kind of thing, down to excruciating minutia such as ability to withstand heat or bad smells. And it's all fiction, right? It's all belief in search of science rather than science in a more objective sense. And it's also at a moment when we're shifting from being a rural society to an urban society. And that's very scary to a lot of people. And it's couched in these terms of modernity. So if you want to be modern, this is what you do. Right? And part of that was about eating. And so you got these really intense arguments that modern rational man was one who didn't eat for tastes, who didn't eat for pleasure, who didn't eat for anything but nutrition, and therefore you should really give up your tastes, preferences, traditions, and kind of listen to the experts basically, who would tell you this is okay to eat, or this is not okay to eat. And there is that racism piece. Okay, so the racism piece in terms of immigrants is that it's poor people who emigrate, right? And so our reaction to the food is as much about the food as it is our reaction to people. And so when those nutrition reformers 1870s to 1920, when they're in their heyday, because they're racist, because they're anti-immigrant, they're looking at those foods and going, this is what's causing the poverty. And it's like, no, that's good food. That's a smart use of resources. The reason poor people eat soups and stews, is it's a way to stretch, right? It's filling. the morality piece was also about that the scientific modern man is one who controls himself, his urges, that are biological. And so once you conquer that, right, that's the mark of scientific rational being. And so the body and the stigma comes in, because you don't see how people eat all the time. What's the evidence of how rational how self-restraining or how moral they are? The body? Right, and so that's why that becomes in part this evidence of your goodness or badness, ie your moral character, which is really messed up. Because the cause of obesity and hunger are both sides of the same coin. So obesity is not too much food, per se. It's the type of food that is affordable and accessible. insofar as obesity rates increase as you go down the class ladder, it becomes the signifier of the poor person of the minoritized in a racial sense person. And rationales for racism were, while people of color can't control their urges. That's why you need white people to control people of color. Women can't control their urges. That's why you need these men nutritionists and scientists and doctors to tell them what to do because they just can't control it and they don't know themselves. And so you get all of these really larger -isms that then get written on the body and this becomes your own advertisement for how good or bad you are."

There is more to our culture of stigma and shame than just food. There is stigma threaded through many common situations and small talk. Think of comments like “you look good! Did you lose weight” or even “you look skinny in that!” we can often tie concepts like bad and good to body size. This, although usually with good intentions is fat-phobic and contributes to making people feel shame for changes in weight or their body. We are going to come back to Fatphobia in a minute but now we know food and weight stigma are pretty normal in the US, how does that directly tie to the freshman 15?

The freshman 15 is often a joke. “Careful now, don’t want to gain the freshman 15” or “this is the recreation center, it’s open every day so don’t worry about gaining the freshman 15.” And this laid-back joke holds within it a ton of shame and stigma. The phrases illude to doing anything possible to avoid gaining weight or to the freshman 15 being embarrassing. This perpetuates the fear of weight gain that some students experience and can negatively affect the mental health of students who do experience weight gain. Even if not fully consciously, we tie peoples worth to decisions they make about food. If a freshman gains some weight society may assume they were lazy or made bad choices in the dining hall and should have been more responsible. As we established in the first episode, this blame on the students and their choices does not take into account any of the biological growth still occurring or the stress and difficult environmental transition students are going through. It is a far more nuanced phenomenon than individual personal choices.

<u>The US and Fatphobia</u>
The root cause of this problem is not individuals, it is the society we live in that perpetuates fatphobia.

Fatphobia is a conscious or unconscious bias toward plus-sized people. Bias against folks with larger bodies is incredibly prevalent in the US. A study found that children can develop a negative view of larger bodies as early as age 3. These societal biases lead to discrimination in the workplace, educational institutions, health care, and other institutions. Research shows us that stereotypes are a common medium that enforces and perpetuates these negative attitudes. In 2022, Cha and colleagues found that weight-related bias decreased when participants were presented with information that was in direct opposition to common stereotypes. When participants heard about the many uncontrollable and multifaceted ways weight can increase, they had more positive views of plus-sized bodies. When presented with stereotypes like overeating there were higher levels of weight bias in comments from the participants. Not only does our bias against larger bodies lead to discrimination against others, it can also be internalized and impact our view of our own body. Weight shame is a common internalized form of fatphobia.

Weight shame is often linked or rooted in body dissatisfaction or negative body attitudes. Grogan and colleagues define body dissatisfaction as “a person’s negative thoughts and feelings about their body. It is related to negative assessments of the size, shape and weight of the body, and generally involves a perceived discrepancy between the person’s assessment, their body and their ideal body” Weight shame and body dissatisfaction are common concerns for women throughout their life span. Women are primarily affected by weight shame due to the greater societal focus on women’s bodies and the restrictive norms surrounding what women’s bodies should look like. We will talk more about this when we discuss the media later in this episode. The prevalence of body dissatisfaction is worrying because

people who are dissatisfied with their body are at a higher risk for engaging in disordered eating behaviors. And in general weight shame is linked with significantly poorer mental health.

This is especially true for adolescents. The relationship between body dissatisfaction, mental health, and ultimately eating disorders is stronger in young people. Vaquero-Cristóbal and colleagues found body dissatisfaction in adolescents is correlated to "lower self-esteem and predicts depressive symptoms, a higher body mass index, less physical activity, clinical eating disorders, a poorer quality diet, disordered eating (i.e., diet behaviors based on trends, food and use of ingredients for emotional regulation), behaviors aimed at losing weight (through diets, food restrictions and modification of dietary habits)." This is especially concerning as all these factors can negatively impact and further distort a person's body image. This dissatisfaction is often internal, though it may be magnified or influenced by external sources. This internalized weight stigma is inherently damaging to our health, and the freshman 15 can be an external vessel that drives that internal body dissatisfaction. Provencher and colleagues found in a 2009 study that women who were self-identified as being affected by the freshman 15 were more dissatisfied with their bodies than their peers. They also had a stronger drive to be thin than their peers who were not affected by the freshman 15. The idea that your body cannot be healthy, or good, or beautiful if it is not thin is unfortunately very prevalent and inherently fatphobic. But the onus is not on the individual for these feelings, we are immersed in a culture where we are constantly inundated with media. And this media is often telling, showing, and alluding to fatphobic sentiments and the thin ideal.

Media and "thin-spiration"

Our societal beliefs around what is considered attractive and what the standard of beauty are enforced and transmitted through media sources. The media has become especially powerful in this day and age where we are highly connected, and most of us are never without our phones. A survey done in 2019 found that 95 percent of adolescents had access to a smartphone and 70 percent had access to social media. This was pretty universal across different demographic groups like gender, race, and socioeconomic status. Despite how common social media use is it is no secret that it may negatively affect us. we know our frequent use of social media isn't good for us, though consensus does not exist on the degree to which it harms us. Social media companies have even done internal research that shows their product is harming us. We saw this play out when a study by Facebook came to light that found their product had a significant negative impact on adolescent mental health. Similar research is starting to be done on how Tik Tok affects young people's body image. This has been spurred on by young users' feedback that "thinspiration" content on the app encouraged them to restrict food and see their bodies in a negative light. These two examples show one of the ways media and social media harm young people's mental health. The content on these popular social media platforms perpetuates body dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem. These two factors mutually influence each other and can make the viewer even more susceptible media messaging about thinness and body size.

Not all social media is doing harm. The main culprit for this is social media platforms that are primarily visual, which happen to be some of the most popular apps among young people currently. These platforms are highly appearance-focused, with more and more content and comments added daily that focus on physical appearance (especially thin conventionally attractive appearances). Platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, Tumblr, Tik Tok, and Facebook are a routine part of young people's lives but the

content within these sites has the ability to do real harm. Social media is brimming with highly edited photos, strategically posed shots, and thinspiration content. As of December 2021, the #fitspiration tag had a rapidly climbing 19.5 million posts on Instagram. Young people can internalize these images and become dissatisfied with their bodies because they do not look like the celebrities or peers on their Instagram feeds. Let's dive deeper into thinspiration and its consequences.

Thinspiration is content that features thin women's bodies as the ideal or goal body and promotes weight loss and restriction to attain that supposed "goal body". It is similar to fitspiration which is thin athletic women promoting diet and exercise programs for weight loss or the general pursuit of thinness. At first brush, fitspiration may not seem harmful as it promotes physical activity and healthy eating, but the content does not reflect healthy approaches to either. This content takes the form of unbalanced and unhealthy diet tips, programs to lose weight at an unhealthy rate, and exercise routines to get a specific body type fast, all being sold as a solution to folks' current bodies and shaming anybody that deviates from extreme thinness. It does not take long to find content on apps like Instagram on how to get abs in 1 month or a diet plan that claims to "get you bikini ready." Not only is this content typically not advised by scientists and doctors, but it pushes an incorrect and damaging narrative that a thin body is the only good body. This content perpetuates the idea that larger bodies are wrong or unattractive, even sometimes going so far as to use negative portrayals of larger bodies as a before photo or inspiration to lose weight. This fosters weight stigma for all ages of people, but adolescents are particularly vulnerable as we discussed prior. Thinspiration can act as a form of social pressure that leads to increased body dissatisfaction, negative body attitudes, and disordered eating behaviors. This pressure can be socially derived from peers and the media, leading to appearance comparisons and internalizing social pressure to be thin or look like the proverbial "ideal body." Young people even can self-identify these harms, yet they persist. An adolescent student was quoted in a study by Tort-Nasarre and colleagues in 2023 as saying "There are lots of comments talking about the physique on social media and this very much affects us teenagers, who are the people who use it most." Not all appearance-based content is harmful though. Research shows positive exposure to mid and plus-sized individuals' bodies led to decreased fatphobic attitudes and more positive views of larger bodies. The problem lies in the pressure to be thin and the praise for thinness that is commonplace on social media.

We do need to establish that though this affects young people of all genders it most heavily affects people who identify as women or have a feminine gender presentation. This is something research does agree on, young women and girls experience social media differently than people of other gender identities. This is because there are much stronger social expectations placed on women regarding what they should look like. When the thin ideal is pushed, or someone's body is publicly critiqued it is most often female bodies that are being put under a microscope. I sat down with Dr. Rachel Campbell, a professor of sociology and Grand Valley State University, to discuss the media's focus on women and girls.

Dr. Campbell interview

Regardless of gender, these messages about what your body should look like and the pursuit of thinness that pervade social media platforms have been shown by a wealth of literature to influence the development and severity of eating disorders.

A research study by Blodgett Salafia and colleagues in 2015 found “A preference for a thin and virtually unattainable body has been associated with the development of eating disorders, particularly anorexia.” A research study by Christenson and colleagues found viewing images of unrealistic bodies and the thin ideal, in all mediums (from print formats like magazines and ads to digital formats like social media or film) increases a person’s negative attitudes about their body. This increase in negative attitudes is significant because Christenson and colleagues found that even momentary increases in negative attitudes predicted harmful behaviors like dieting, restriction, excessive exercise, among other disordered eating behaviors. The same study also found that the duration and frequency of our exposure to thinspiration can have a significantly increase negative attitudes. Using social media more often and for longer bouts was linked with poorer body image and an elevated amount of disordered eating behaviors. If an individual who is already at a heightened risk for disordered eating is exposed to media perpetuating the thin ideal, research shows that negative attitudes about their body can increase which can cause increased dissatisfaction with their body. This is particularly relevant when talking about young adults as college-aged women are at a heightened risk for disordered eating and clinically significant eating disorders. But both people with and without eating disorders are affected by fitspiration and thinspiration. Frequent exposure to this type of content is linked with a greater risk of disordered eating behaviors and increased feelings of body dissatisfaction. And, the effect can be most detrimental in people who have already been struggling with eating disorder symptoms.

Now not all people or adolescents on social media are affected by the harmful messages in media. Having high self-esteem and confidence have been identified as protective factors for the harmful body standards and images found on social media. Young people with high self-esteem and confidence tend to be more critical of the messages of media and to internalize fewer of the body standards pushed on them. And even in women who lacked self-confidence and had internalized thinspiration content, research found warning them that an image was altered led to lower body satisfaction. This shows the importance of calling out and informing young people that many images on social media are highly edited. There have even been calls in recent years for prominent celebrities with young audiences to be transparent about their photo editing or plastic surgery due to the effect the manufactured Instagram image has on young women.

The freshman 15 may be one small phrase but it holds within it the power of all these societal messages that the only good body is a thin body and that gaining weight is shameful. When joked about or used to tease students it has the power to cause all the damage thinspiration is associated with. They are rooted in the same fatphobic, unrealistic, and commonplace messages that seek to harm each and every one of us.

Up Next

In the next episode, we will talk about how the idea of the freshman 15 and the thin ideal it represents hurts more than just freshman. We will discuss the shame of pandemic weight gain, how families can impact body image, and what we can all do to take care of ourselves and our peers to stomp out unrealistic body standards and weight shame. Until then remember, the weight gain of freshman fame? Yeah that’s built on fear and weight shame. See ya in the next one.

Credits

Special thanks to Jennifer Stewart and Rachel Campbell for their time and expertise. I would also like to thank the Fredrick Meijer Honors College for their support and for providing audio equipment. This has been The Freshman 15: The Who, What, and How it Harms Us, Thank you for listening. This episode contains 71 scholarly sources, these can be found in the episode notes.

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Episode 3

Intro

Welcome back to **The Freshman 15: The Who, What, and How it Harms Us.** I am your host, Eva VanWyck. In this episode, we will talk about how the freshman 15 and the fatphobia it is rooted in is not a notion that just harms freshman. Weight shame harms us all regardless of weight or body size. This became apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic when weight gain shame started to pervade the internet as we all social distanced in our homes.

This affects more than freshmen

Mid-pandemic, after months and months of social distance and stay-at-home orders, people were no doubt struggling. But one common struggle that closely mirrors the notion of the freshman 15 was the weight stigma and shame that emerged during this time period. It is so similar to the freshman 15 that people started using the term COVID-15 or quarantine 15, especially on social media. There was a fear of gaining weight due to increased sedentary behavior, stress, change in diet, and the fact many people weren't leaving their homes to engage in physical activity. For those who were experiencing weight changes, there was accompanying shame and embarrassment. Drastic increases were seen in pandemic-related body dissatisfaction and concerns about weight were widespread. These fears and insecurities were expressed and amplified through both the media and public health messaging and through social media and interpersonal interactions.

Weight stigma and negative messaging around weight gain and obesity were prevalent in messages being disseminated by public health organizations and health systems. Dr. Anthony Fauci, the now-former Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease, served as a key source of information during the COVID-19 pandemic. His public messaging regularly posited that plus-sized people were at a higher risk for COVID-19-related complications and greater severity of the disease. Although this was meant to serve as helpful public health messaging, this repeated message increased stress and worry over health outcomes for obese people, and increased the fear of weight gain for average size people. The problem is not spreading awareness about obesity and its connection to COVID-19. The problem is more often than not we pushed blame and criticism toward obese folks instead of resources to keep them safe and healthy. Especially in the news, messaging blamed obese people for their weight and shamed them for not making healthy choices and lacking discipline. This is an unrealistic and highly stigmatized view of obesity, which is a complex issue that cannot be blamed solely on individual choices. This fatphobic lens that the media and our society spoke about obesity and COVID through got in the way of supporting and protecting a vulnerable group.

As I just mentioned the media reported on weight-related health warnings and added to the negative stigma surrounding gaining a bit of weight during quarantine. In some cases, these news outlets even fear mongered and used increasingly stigmatized language around weight gain and obesity risks. For their audiences, this increased the stress people were already experiencing around maintaining their health during the pandemic and gave folks one more thing to worry about in a time of uncertainty. As I mentioned, this message was prevalent on social media as well, taking the form of memes and jokes about the quarantine 15. Content was posted daily making jokes about stress eating, gaining weight, and other negative body-focused messages. These memes perpetuated stereotypes and anti-fat attitudes

often very blatantly. Posts like “me before and after quarantine” showcased unflatteringly portrayed changes in weight, mocking those who have experienced weight gain. These types of posts are rooted in fatphobia and they contain harmful stereotypes about larger bodies, like the idea gaining weight means you are lazy, slovenly, and poorly dressed. The increase in quarantine 15 posts also sent the message, much like the freshman 15 does, that weight gain is bad, shameful, and should be avoided at all costs. This fed right in the existing fitspiration content on social media that pushes diet culture and unhealthy weight loss tips. Fortes and colleagues found in their study in 2022 that being exposed to fatphobic messaging in the media could increase the risk of or worsen disordered eating behaviors in a pandemic. There is a uniting belief, incorrect may I add, that unites the idea of the freshman 15 or the quarantine 15 and all weight stigmatizing content. This is the perception that weight is always controllable and that those who cannot control their weight are failures, lazy, not trying hard enough, among other hateful implicit and explicit beliefs. These messages have another factor that makes them so harmful, they make weight gain seem inevitable and unavoidable. This can serve to make those struggling with their weight feel a sense of hopelessness or that whatever healthy behaviors they may engage in are just a waste of time. This decreases folks confidence and self-efficacy, which is the belief that you are able to do something. Pearl identified in their 2020 article that this may lead to a “why try” attitude that erodes people’s willpower to maintain or engage in healthy habits and behaviors.

The current rhetoric around weight gain is, as stated in an article by Pearl in 2020, is “harmful to people across the weight spectrum”. This messaging negatively impacts us all, though some are impacted more than others. Young adult females were exposed to weight stigmatizing content 10% more often than others. And that increased to 20% if the young woman was plus-sized. Obese folks and folks struggling with their weight were also affected negatively by this content to a greater degree than others. Research has found that a history of being exposed to weight stigma led to poorer well-being and higher rates of clinically significant depression and disordered eating. This is especially upsetting as folks labeled obese experience high levels of weight stigma daily whether in a pandemic or not due to societal fatphobia.

The pandemic weight shame mirrors the mechanisms and harms of the idea of the freshman 15. The only difference is that the pandemic affected all of us, not just first year college students. I hope this example and perhaps even reflecting on your own pandemic experience shows you how damaging the term the freshman 15 and all it embodies is to students self-image, well-being, and mental health. These terms and ideas are powerful, they are not harmless jokes, or college traditions. They may not impact everyone, but the harm they do to some is inarguable, alarming, and oftentimes long-lasting. I have mentioned that these ideas are woven into our society, and the best way to take away their power and stop them from doing harm is to remove terms like the freshman 15 from our vocabulary and to fight fatphobia with empowerment, body positivity, and kindness. Because fatphobia is socially built it lives in far more places than just the term the freshman 15 or social media platforms.

<u>Family and friends impact</u>

Let’s dig into how our own negative views of our bodies can impact our families and friends. Because these attitudes are woven into our society, peers, who may themselves be feeling insecure and battling internalized fatphobia, can do real harm as well. The influence of friends can be a powerful force for good, but can just as easily lead to young people damaging each other’s body image. Young people,

especially women, can be influenced by peers and peer pressure that they need to look a certain way. Romantic partners can also perpetuate insecurity through negative comments and attitudes about others' bodies. Teasing, comments about what a person should change about their body, and normalization of disordered eating behaviors can all foster insecurity and weight or body concerns. We have all heard the old adage "kids can be cruel" often in the context of brushing off the harmful comments peers make to each other. But young people often, whether intentionally or unintentionally, affect the body image of their peers through comments and attitudes in person and on social media.

The body dissatisfaction of a family member can also influence body dissatisfaction in other members of the family, especially in adolescents. If you grow up watching your mother worry about her weight or her hips being too wide or her chest being too small, it can have an impact on your own view of your body. Blodgett Salafia and colleagues found in a 2015 study that "Parental weight-related teasing, negative comments about body shape, pressure to lose weight, and encouragement to diet have been associated with body dissatisfaction, dieting, disordered eating behaviors, and eating disorders among both females and males." Parents comments on their own insecurities and any behaviors they take to address those - like dieting for example - send a message to their kids, though often not intentionally, that they too should want to change their body. In many ways health can be transmitted from generation to generation, I sat down with Dr. Anna Hammersmith, a professor of sociology at grand valley state university, to learn more about this and how it applies to weight shame.

Dr. Hammersmith interview

Because we can identify these harms, whether they be the freshman 15, family comments, or the media, it is important that we work to stop the cycle of weight shame and fatphobia. There are numerous ways we can do this so lets get into how we can help.

<u>How we can help</u>

Families and support networks are poised to help develop a positive body image and recognize signs of disordered eating. Families can foster an environment that allows their children to build self-esteem and a positive body image. Tort-Nasarre and colleagues in 2023 found that this was effective and even crucial for the development of a healthy body image. We also need to stop using the comparison mindset surrounding physical appearance, especially while on social media. Parents and teachers can help by educating adolescents to view the messages and images they see in media critically. When someone is struggling with disordered eating friends and family members should be able to identify the signs so they can help them get treatment. People are more likely to disclose that they are struggling with disordered eating to their support network than to a health care provider. Research by Sangiorgio and colleagues found that college students were able to identify disordered eating in peers as concerning and recommend their peers seek help, even if they didn't know that the concerning behavior constituted an eating disorder. Educating yourself on what disordered eating can look like is important to be able to watch out for your friends and families and reach out to help if they are struggling.

<u>Body neutrality/positivity</u>

Body positivity is linked to improved well-being and has protective effects from the harmful messages we have talked about throughout this podcast. Tylka & Wood-Barcalow defined body positivity as "a

multidimensional construct that represents love and respect, acceptance and appreciation of individuals and feeling comfortable with their body, independently of their actual physical appearance" It is meeting your body where it is at and loving it no matter what. Body positivity can be hard for some people though. Especially folks who have struggled with their body image. An alternate way of viewing your body is body-acceptance or body-neutrality. Instead of self-love these are closer to the notion that this is your body, it keeps you alive and it is the only one you get. Looking at your body in a positive or accepting light can increase your confidence and self-esteem, which has a protective effect against negative messaging and harmful media.

Language matters

The last tip I will leave you with is simple yet impactful. Here it is: language matters. The words we chose to use affect others, for better or for worse. We need to be intentional about the words we use and the comments we make to ensure we are not perpetuating fatphobia or harming others. The comments we make about other people's bodies can linger and impact their self-view both negatively and positively. Unfortunately, negative comments tend to stick with people for longer than positive ones. I am sure we all can think of a time someone made a negative comment about our body that stuck with us. When I was in eighth grade a classmate asked me why I had hairy arms and why I didn't shave them. I was insecure about that comment for YEARS after, but I don't remember many of the compliments I received even recently. That doesn't mean positive words don't have an impact, it is just to say that the scars from words can run deep so it is important to be compassionate and intentional with our words. It's not just the words from others that hurt though, how we talk to ourselves can be harmful too. Disparaging our own bodies can be damaging. But there is power in positive self-talk, working towards self-love or self-acceptance can improve your own confidence in your body and maybe even help you feel empowered to make others feel good in their skin too. It's like being on an airplane, You have to put your mask on first before you help others. Healing your relationship with your own body can help you spread body positivity within your family, peer group, and even social media platforms.

In an interview with Dr. Rachel Campbell for episode 2 she posed a question to me that I would like to include here.

My hope for the future

Thanks for listening

We have reached the end of our journey here, but I hope you enjoyed the ride and that this information stays with you. This topic is very important to me, I have experienced the harms of the freshman 15 notion firsthand and I see them reemerge with each entering college class. We all have the power to change these norms. All we need is to be armed with quality information, intentionality, and most importantly, compassion. Together we can stomp out weight stigma and take care of ourselves and our peers. Remember, the weight gain of freshman fame? Yeah, that's built on fear and weight shame. Thank you for listening.

Credits

Special thanks to Dr. Anna Hammersmith for her time and expertise as an interviewee and also as my incredible project advisor. I would also like to thank the Fredrick Meijer Honors College for their support

and for providing audio equipment. This has been The Freshman 15: The Who, What, and How it Harms Us, Again, thank you for listening. This episode contains 35 scholarly sources, these can be found in the episode notes.

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