Distorted Reflections

College campuses are notorious for their high rates of body image issues and disorders among students

By Ximena Ramirez

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Pictures in magazines show the stereotypical portrayal of women by the media. These ideal body types can lead to many problems for young women.

What we see isn’t always what we get. The influence of the media can lower self-esteem and contribute to eating disorders.
"In high school, your body is going through changes, and when you get to BC, these changes come to fruition, and your world changes," said Maureen O'Dea, LSOE '07.

"All these changes happen at once, and it is easy to focus on your body's changes because you don't want to focus on anything else, like how your friendships are changing or how your relationship with your family is changing," she continued.

This often leads to an increase in weight, the feared "freshman 15," after which students begin to diet or exercise heavily to lose the extra pounds they have put on. Their focus becomes centered on obtaining an "ideal" body image that will offer them acceptance in society and attention from members of the opposite sex.

"I used to never work out but as soon as I started gaining weight in college I freaked out because I knew people would look at me and say, 'look at her, she's gained weight.' I feel like it is no longer about what we feel about ourselves, its more about what others see when they look at us," said Giblin.

Women often resort to extreme measures. Eating disorders have become a solution for many. Anorexia nervosa is a common eating disorder characterized by extreme obsession with food, starvation dieting, and severe weight loss.

Bulimia is another eating disorder that is four to five times more common than anorexia, but far more difficult to detect. Bulimia is exemplified by compulsive binge eating followed by purging through self-induced vomiting, exercise, or the use of laxatives.

"It is important to appreciate all the looks of the human body," said O'Dea. "I distanced myself from people who focused on their image. It can be dangerous here at BC because when you're around those people it is easy to slip into that mindset and focus on how much you eat and how much you exercise."

"A negative body image contributes to many problems on campus, like eating disorders and self-esteem problems," said Blais.

Both anorexia nervosa and bulimia cause extreme defects to a person's physical and emotional health. Despair, self-loathing, guilt, depression, low self-esteem, and an inability to conduct normal relationships are all results of eating disorders. Captivating their victims, eating disorders allow their prey to feel empowered by their sickness often times they represent the only source of control the person can find in her daily life.

"I've heard a lot of conversations about people skipping classes to go to the Plex, or stressing about meals that they've had. "I've heard conversations in elevators and just around campus. But it feels like it's a problem that goes undiscussed," said O'Dea.

In today's world, women are inevitably under various forms of pressure. Not only must they constantly prove themselves as competent, intelligent individuals in the workforce, they must also strive to attain an impossible body "ideal" set up by society.
Thinness has become a virtue that every woman seeks to attain. In reality, it has become an obsession. In order to be accepted by society, be happy with one's self, or feel worthy of any attention, some women feel they must fulfill this unfeasible thin requirement first. If they don't, they are labeled fat, ugly, or unhealthy, and unworthy of any praise, and are just to be pitied.

They say beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but unfortunately eyes have been distorted with every glance taken in the mirror. But there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

"I definitely think it is possible to have a healthy body image in today's world," said Tilghman-Havens. "Many women make intentional choices about which magazines they pick up, which shows they choose not to watch, and what they talk about in conversation with one another, because it leads down a negative road where women feel like they have to be self-critical just to fit in."

The WRC offers resources for those who seek to escape the pressures of society, including a program called HOPE, which discusses body image, eating concerns, and healthy living. It meets Thursdays at 3 p.m. and is open to all female students.

"In any kind of relatively homogenous environment, pressures to conform tend to be high, but if you look around campus, you'll notice that there are women and men of all shapes and sizes at BC," said Tilghman-Havens.

"My ideal campus would be one where both women and men would accept themselves and others for their character and giftedness, not for their appearance. BC seems to be moving in that direction. I think having a healthy body image means accepting yourself as you are - flaws and all, and I believe that's what each of us are called to as human beings."