Mirror, Mirror in D-Hall, Who's the Fittest One Of All

Chelsey Davidson
When you were 10 years old, what were your fears and worries? If you were anything like me, 10 was a year filled with science fair rockets, first playground crushes, and rock-paper-scissors fights over who got to play goalie at recess soccer games. In retrospect, it seems as though I had no worries, and if I did have anxieties at that age, they were likely harmless.

Yet a study has found that children of this age have at least one very real and destructive fear: 81 percent of 10-year-olds - boys and girls alike - are actively worried about becoming fat. I emphasize the commonality of both genders because typically body image issues are considered to be inherently female; however, men face as much pressure to live up to the muscle mass of G.I. Joe as women face to live up to the skinny ideal of Barbie. And in our society, we consider it taboo to talk about either.

In late October, a University of Richmond panel of body image professionals spoke to a group of 200 students as a part of Fat Talk Free week, sponsored by Delta Delta Delta. A video, also sponsored by the national organization, opened the talk and illustrated the powerful statistics of body image issues facing Americans today. The talk was then opened up to the panel, comprised of Tracy Cassalia, Richmond's manager of health education and wellness, Charlynn Small, a CAPS therapist, and Dr. Lynne Deane, of the Health Center, who have all seen how body image issues manifest themselves as life-threatening physiological and psychological problems on Richmond's campus. Here is how obsessing over the number on the scale and the reflection in the mirror affects people of both genders:
WOMEN

With a new thin-ideal craze hitting social media every summer – from thigh gaps to bikini bridges to the belly button challenge – it is sadly unsurprising that 83 percent of college women diet to lose weight, according to a video shown during the talk. According to the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) website, 20 million women will suffer from a clinically significant eating disorder during their lifetimes. Over 350,000 people die from an eating disorder every year, while breast cancer claims 40,000 lives, according to the Atlanta Center for Eating Disorders (ACED).

ACED also reports that women ages 15-24 are 12 times more likely to die of an eating disorder than any other cause of death.

We support runs and wear pink to show support for breast cancer, yet largely ignore body image issues in society. That’s why Shay Duterte, body image coordinator for Delta Delta Delta, felt strongly about organizing the talk to help stop perpetuating the thin ideal. The panelists she chose, Duterte said, were purposefully familiar campus faces so that audience members would know where to go should any be having body image issues.

“Our campus is largely focused on the thin ideal and being the best in everything, from internships to grades to time spent in the gym,” Duterte said. “I wanted to invite a comprehensive board to speak about everything needed for someone facing a body image crisis or eating disorder.”

According to materials provided by Cassalia, if Barbie were a real person, her neck would be unable to support her head, her stomach would be too small to house more than half a functional liver, and her feet would be a size 3. Huffington Post measures her height as 5 feet 9 inches, and 110 pounds, giving her a dangerously low BMI of 16.24. This is the thin ideal we are raised with, and it has nothing to do with health.

MEN

Over 10 million men in the U.S. will suffer from a clinically significant eating disorder in their lifetimes, according to NEDA. NEDA also reports that 43 percent of men were dissatisfied with their bodies, with one-third of adolescent males using unhealthy weight control behaviors. Largely because of masculine ideals, men afflicted with an eating disorder are far less likely to seek help, making male body issues a largely silent epidemic.

“Body image issues manifest themselves differently in different groups,” Small said. “All have body issues, and no one is immune.”

The manifestation of body image issues for Richmond men may very well be in attempts to attain the “J. Crew Catalogue, fraternity look,” Deane said.

Cassalia believes the G.I. Joe ideal is just as forceful. G.I. Joe became increasingly unrealistically muscular from the 1970s to now, Cassalia said, and today his muscles are so large he would be unable to stand. The current G.I. Joe Extreme has biceps that exceed
the size of his waist, and would be far larger than competitive Olympians if scaled to human size, according to the New York Times.

In addition to eating disorders, this ideal often produces exercise addictions in men, and may have contributed to the increase in usage of muscle-enhancing drugs. Over 18 percent of high school male athletes now use anabolic steroids, according to the New York Times.

“Do you even lift, brah?” is shaping this campus more than you might think.

RICHMOND STRESS

“My peers seem hyper-focused on the next internship, the next course, the next connection,” Soleil Shah, a Richmond College junior, said. “I feel as though there is a constant pressure, for better or for worse, to fast-track my career success because of my environment at college.”

It’s true: Richmond students pride themselves for being over-achievers and making it look easy. “Our work ethic and pursuit of perfection doesn’t end in the classroom,” Duterte said. “We want our bodies to look perfect as well.”

One of Duterte’s friends began dieting before freshman year because of a ranking she saw on College Prowler; Richmond women were ranked “A+,” putting pressure on her to look the part.

For some, this stress manifests itself in more serious ways. A senior Westhampton College student, who chooses to remain anonymous, dealt with her stress for four years through an eating disorder. Fearing the “Freshman 15” she cut down her daily calories to fewer than 900 per day. By sophomore year, she had begun a vicious cycle of binge eating followed by purging to compensate for the increased calories.

“I started being around these incredibly smart, incredibly beautiful, incredibly talented people and I felt like I needed to keep up,” she said. “When you have a certain group of personality traits that make you a perfectionist, a go-getter, and very motivated, you feel a lot of pressure.” Thinking that she was keeping her body healthy by watching her weight and working out daily, she slipped into an eating disorder. By junior year, she said she had hit rock bottom.

After getting help late last year from both therapists and nutritionists, she has developed a new mentality and no longer strives for perfection. “I’m very focused on what makes me happy,” she said. “As a senior, there is an insane amount of pressure to find a job. I’ve come to the conclusion that I know I’m going to be okay, and I can’t let the stress of others get to me.”

Her daily routine now includes mindfulness exercises, which she says have made it easier for her to control her thoughts. She also no longer participates in weekday conversations which turn into what she calls “stress competitions” — conversations in which people seem to battle for who has the busiest week, the most tests, and the most important meetings.

“The pressures are still there. But I love this school. … It’s just filled with nice people. I should be my happiest when I’m here, and I am now. What I needed was the help and tools to control my stress and anxiety.”

On a hike with her father during the summer, she found that the worth of her body was so much more than what it looked like. Rather than focusing on an ideal, she ought to focus on the health and power of our bodies. “Everyone’s bodies are incredible because of what they can do,” she said, “and they deserve respect.”