

Hesse biber- am i thin
enough



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Cult-Like Attributes

Many modern women subject themselves to an intense day-to-day involvement in the pursuit of thinness demands. These demands resemble those behaviors commonly associated with cult hood. Three main "tools" are used in order to achieve this goal or ideal. The Cult of Thinness invests in thinness through primary rituals. The rituals are followed through by the obsession of a particular "ideal" body. There are also extremities or positions of higher authority with extreme involvement in cults, much like the level of devotion in The Cult of Thinness.

Daily actions of checking and critiquing can be performed in many ways. Body monitoring offers an array of resources. Constantly weighing one's self is a way of achieving quantitative precision. Being able to pinpoint an exact gain or loss is a necessity in this cycle. To be able to have an ideal weight and to accurately compare yourself leaves no room for misinterpretation. Counting Calories helps maintain discipline to be sure not to exceed the limit. If one eats certain "restricted" food, it is seen to be sinful or as breaking the rules. This restriction of food intake is in a highly disciplined way. This is part of a larger process of dieting and exercising which is used in an obsessive manner to obtain the "perfect" body. These diet rituals can go as far as to fast for days at a time. Another "tool" of monitoring is food watching, monitoring the intake of "good" and "bad" foods. Nutritionally healthy foods are considered good. Anything else, from sweets to foods with fat, are considered bad foods.

Other rituals are performed through comparisons. By evaluating and examining old pictures and using them as motivation. Having a constant

reminder of previous slimness can push a person to regain what might be an unrealistic goal. Mirrors provide a selective image to the viewer. You only see what you want to. This is particularly important, as most members to this Cult of Thinness have low self esteem. A mirror can be used to scrutinize and dissect physical flaws. "A mirror reflects the virtual image of an object placed in front of it." This provides an analogy for how society fosters women's obsession with their weight and body image. These rituals can serve as a reminder to ones self that one is not meeting the standards, guilt and self penance are results.

In a cult, there is an object or ideal to " worship." The Cult of Thinness rather bows down to powerful cultural forces that reinforce the idea that a female's worth is dependent on her physical attributes. This worshipping is supported by a strong view that thin is beautiful, and sacred. And fat is lazy, unwanted, unloved, ugly, and weak. Evident is this "'path to perfection'" (Hesse-Biber pg. 9) not only is this image virtually unattainable, but only five percent of women can actually achieve the body frame of an average magazine cover-girl. Fitting this mold, although almost impossible, also comes with a culturally assumed personality. " Attractive people are viewed as being happier, more successful, smarter, more interesting, warmer, more poised, and more sociable" (Hesse-Biber pg. 59) All of these qualities are associated with the attractive body, the ideal body. This image of thinness is what is commonly displayed as attractive, setting the standard of perfection.

There are extremities in devotion with the Cult of Thinness, as with many cults. There are more severe diseases and disorders that comes with a deeper involvement with the cult. Diseases such as anorexia and bulimia.

These diseases are very dangerous and can lead to death. During the time these diseases are forming, one does not realize the extent of damages caused by their method of achieving the " ideal" body. All in the pursuit of a common goal, which is worshipped and conducted through a series of rituals and can lead to damaging effects.

Social Causes

The Cult of Thinness is not due to psychological aspects. We can see it is rather due to pressures and images fed to one persistently throughout ones life. This can be done through smaller sub-cults. Family and peer groups are two main sub-cults that practice continually effective methods of instilling accepted visualizations of the " ideal" body. The other effective social influence is the media which only depicts females in a very unattainable body.

The media and advertising agencies have gained an unbelievable profit margin off of the American peoples strive to attain a certain size, shape, or weight. There are so many ways in which capitalism has benefited in this obsessive behavior the members of the Cult of Thinness exhibit. Diet books, tapes, movies, programs, etc are all examples of marketing this problem. The more people see that they can " better" themselves through losing weight, or eating the " right" food, it leads one to believe they must also strive to meet this goal. If your not eating " right," you must be eating wrong. It is made evident in any way possible that the body can be constantly improved. Through magazines and T. V. we are fed an image that is unrealistic and far from the average size of the American woman. Through this constant filtering of fat, we only see the beautiful people, the almost

unattainable body. It is in this way that the media is almost brain-washing American people with this perfect image of beauty. The fitness industry has become a forty-plus million dollar industry. The rituals performed at fitness centers or clubs, are not being done by the person, but "the thing does them" (Hesse-Biber pg. 46) Through publication of the "ideal" body, one can make comparisons and find what materials can be purchased that will supposedly make the body fit this mold. Therefore fulfilling profit from displaying this image, and also profits from selling the corrective material.

The family is the origin of all beliefs. The environment of the family setting is where all morals and beliefs are derived from. As children, behavior is mocked. You are a product of your family and how you were raised. Hence acceptable weight standards and settings for physical characteristics are established. Communication from mother-daughter, or father-daughter is what sets these standards. The family is the basic support system. Some families repeat the cultural values of thinness, others modify the message. If it is repeated, one is set from birth to be a product of this cycle of the Cult of Thinness. Mothers can also modulate cultural norms of thinness and alleviate some of the pressures young girls may feel. When the message is modified to accept a person for reasons other than physical properties, then the cycle has broke, and there is less a chance in falling victim to the Cult of Thinness. Siblings serve an important role, either by teasing or by supporting. This environment is an example of the family dichotomy that either supports or denies the Cult of Thinness.

When a child reaches pre-adolescence, their main influence shifts from family to peer groups. "Peer groups and the school environment begin to

take on important mediating roles fostering the Cult of Thinness.'" (Hesse-Biber pg. 88) This is where the "fat is ugly" social view is amplified. In constant competition with each other, teenagers see their physical body as a way of gaining an "upper hand." This is even more damaging as one looks at college eating habits. "A semi-closed' environment tends to amplify sociocultural pressures." Being away from home affects the regularity of eating habits. Eating habits are altered around schedules and availability of food. When meals are missed, the next meal is usually double the quantity of regular meals. This disorderly eating comes from imitating, competition, or solidarity. As women use food as a means of calming and coping, food can solve problems such as the stress and strain from academics to social life. The statistics prove most college students are from middle-upper class, these groups place high value on thinness.

Sociological Remedies

By means of social activism, much can be changed. Bringing this problem to light could effect many aspects of the Cult of Thinness, such as the media and capitalism. This activism should be done through large groups of people on seemingly important factors that attribute to the Cult of Thinness.

Boycotting certain products or certain companies products, is detrimental. Showing the public that this is a problem and that there are ways of eliminating this cult, from the outside in. Starting with the media and advertising, then medical facilities. Offering liquid diets and supplements that can be harmful, this is an extremely profitable market. Lastly, by altering communities. People are the main motivators. The more people involved, the larger the impact it will make. Making people aware that this cult is deadly and the members are increasing daily. Having people speak

upon this subject that have experienced this cult personally, and professional who have studied this area of anthropology/sociology with actual information in terms of statistics. Another method of activism can be using the media, a tool which now publicizes this cult, against itself. Use television and magazines to inform the public.

Holding workshops and lectures getting the message out, is a form of educating people upon this problem. Not only adults should be made aware, but seminars at middle and high schools should also be available. To make preventative measures that this problem can be stopped before it begins on another generation. To educate young people on the dangers of the Cult of Thinness, and make them aware of warning signs that they may be falling prey.