

*You know, cover girls eat nothing
She says beauty is pain and there's beauty in everything
What's a little bit of hunger?
I could go a little while longer, she fades away*

*“Scars to Your Beautiful”
Performed by Alessia Cara**

WHEN THE MIRROR’S AN ENEMY

It was during college that Allison Kiefner-Burmeister, Ph.D., UF assistant professor of psychology, realized that even children ages 4-6 were concerned about body image. A developmental psychologist, Kiefner-Burmeister joined the University of Findlay faculty in 2014. Her research has focused mainly on body image, weight bias and eating behaviors. She summarizes it as, “Healthy mind, healthy body.”

Food, obesity, eating disorders and body image; the issues start at an increasingly younger age, thanks to media representations of perfection and lack of knowledge about what foods are healthy and what foods are not.



“Today, everything is airbrushed, including TV promotions and even the Sear’s Catalog,” Kiefner-Burmeister stated. “By age 13, kids are aware of airbrushing, but the younger ages aren’t aware. Kids need reminders about how to handle this.” She added that some countries require disclaimers in advertising that state the image has been “digitally modified.”

Constant exposure to perfect, unattainable images of human beings can cause young women and men to feel they are inferior which can lead to eating disorders and depression.

Along with her students, Kiefner-Burmeister is conducting a study on body types, involving children ages 4-7. They have interviewed kids from Findlay, Toledo and Sidney, Ohio and plan to add inner city Cincinnati to assure a diversity of participants. Using paper cutouts and photos, they question the subjects individually, with always interesting results.

“This spring, we are showing each child a group of photos and asking who is the most likely to be president,” she explained. “Even though they have only known an African-American president until recently, we anticipate that most of them will still choose a white male.”

Young children are also bombarded with “ideal” human images through television and movies, Kiefner-Burmeister explained.

“Disney is O.K. when they stick strictly to cartoon images or real people, but now they’re using computer-generated images that look real but aren’t. I give them credit for trying to be more culturally diverse, but they still generally use light-skinned African American women and, recently, a cartoon Hawaiian who definitely does not have the normative body type. Disney may care about diversity, but not about body image.”

CARAMEL LATTE ...
THE PERFECT STORM?

Related to body image and the physical perception of oneself is the issue of obesity in children and adolescents. In 2013, Kiefner-Burmeister published an article about graduate schools rejecting obese students and received lots of attention from the academic community and media. Today, she continues to wage war on the promotion of unhealthy foods to unsuspecting audiences.

“We’re programmed to love sugar, salt and fats,” she said. “That’s why a Starbucks’ salted caramel latte is the perfect storm. Of course, the Starbucks’ marketing folks know this!”

Our government could also be a major culprit in the growing childhood obesity problem by subsidizing foods containing corn, starches and sugar and not providing subsidies for healthy fruits and vegetables. “We live in a country where pizza is considered a vegetable,” she laughed.

“We’re also adding much more sugar to our foods than we did in the 1940s-60s,” she commented. “When you add this to the fact that kids are much less active, it’s a big problem.”

Large amounts of sugar can also be present in seemingly healthy foods like dried cranberries and ranch dressing. Kiefner-Burmeister refers to this as “hidden sugars,” and will work with area middle school students this spring to help them identify sugar-laden foods and lower their intake.

Parents, too, need to be more aware of what their children are eating. Last summer, Kiefner-Burmeister traveled to Italy and observed mealtime interactions between children and their parents. “Consistently, parents were on their cell phones while the kids were eating. Even kids as young as 18 months seemed to have learned not to interrupt when mom or dad was on the phone.”

Should the amount of sugar and other unhealthy ingredients be legislated?

“I’m not totally on either side of this argument,” she explained. “Still, we wouldn’t have seatbelts, helmets and car seats if the government hadn’t stepped in. I do believe in higher taxes on unhealthy items.”

A NEW FOCUS

In the past few years, the University of Findlay Psychology Program has taken on a new focus and has also expanded both quantitative and qualitative research opportunities for students. The department had had a strong emphasis on counseling, but hired three research psychologists between 2012 and 2014. There are now 15 student research assistants, actively involved with their professors’ research interests. This spring, some UF psychology students

will present their research studies in San Diego and Chicago, while Kiefner-Burmeister travels to Austin, Texas and San Diego, to deliver her own presentations.

Joining Kiefner-Burmeister as members of the researching psychology faculty are Andrea Mata, Ph.D., who also focuses on children and adolescents in her work on topics such as test anxiety and extracurricular activities, and Adam Larson, Ph.D., who has published research on visual fields and scene recognition.

Individuals interested in a psychology major or discussing Kiefner-Burmeister’s research projects, can contact her at kiefner-burmeister@findlay.edu, or 419-434-4523.

*Caracciolo, C., Feder, W., Tillman, C., Wansel, A. (2017). Scars to Your Beautiful recorded by Alessia Cara. On Know-It-All. Def-Jam-UMG. Released July 26, 2016.



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