

[Music]

Mia:

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Hello, and welcome to Mirror Mirrors podcast on “the COVID body”. I’m your host, Mia...

Marie:

And I’m Marie...

Mia:

And today we will be talking about COVID-19 and body image. And just so everyone knows, we are not professionals. We are students. And some of the content we may be talking about today may be a little bit tricky and triggering for some people. So, COVID has obviously put us all through change, and there has been numerous battles that we've all had to overcome. But particularly, one of the things that I have seen is a rise in negative body image and diet culture. And particularly-- actually, me and Marie, were talking about this-- the COVID body and the quote, unquote, the meme that may have started it all.

Marie:

So, one of the memes that has been really popular during COVID-19 on social media-- I've definitely-- I don't know if you've seen it Mia, but I've definitely seen the quarantine-15, which is kind of a play on freshmen-15, so gaining weight, and kind of making fun of it, but I think that meme actually really perpetuates weight stigma.

Mia:

Yeah, I have seen that meme-- or especially when COVID first started, and everyone had to go into lockdown, and obviously, people couldn't be as active as they were before. People couldn't go to gyms. People couldn't go for walks. People were very confined to their house. And there just was this huge fearmongering of gaining weight, and people talking about, “Oh my god. The quarantine-15” and “Watch what you eat in quarantine.” And at first, the memes were funny. We were obviously all indulging a little bit more, but then they started becoming very, very harmful. And with the COVID meme, I have definitely seen diet culture take this hold on social media: diet culture that is just thinly veiled, that's supposed to act like it's healthy, but it's not. It's just-- it's pretty much just pocketed eating disorders at this point.

Marie:

I actually saw a study on this quarantine-15 COVID meme, and it analyzed the content of these posts that people were posting. And it was posts like people comparing themselves to animals like whales and just making jokes about being bigger like it was a negative thing. And all these posts in the study were noted to be very appearance focused, very stereotyped. It stereotyped weight gain as lazy, which it isn't, and it stereotyped weight gain as controllable. It stereotyped it as simple and there was this dislike at gaining weight. But a lot of these images were mostly put online by white women who would fit into the stereotypical body, which is concerning that somebody would be making fun of somebody else's body.

Mia:

Yeah, especially for just the sake of comparing the bodies because obviously, COVID has been hard on everyone. No two people's experiences during COVID and quarantine are going to be the same. I've definitely noticed a trend-- or maybe-- when we were talking to a community member, me and Marie and I, I brought up the fact that COVID

has really seen a trend in fatphobia, and she made a very good point. She said, "Are you seeing a trend? Or has it always been there and COVID has just had to make you confront it. See it eye to eye." And I've been sitting with that for a long time since we've had that interview-- well, that curious conversation and I honestly agree with it. I really do. Has COVID perpetuated this fatphobic agenda, or has it just always been there? And now that we have to stay inside and stay away, do we have to confront our own biases?

Marie:

And that's a very good point that this community member made because I think even, we were talking about this when we first started. Our project was-- it was very, "Oh, COVID has changed the way that we look at bodies" and-- but it's always been there. It's always been a thing. There's always been fatphobia. There's always been diet culture online. But I definitely think during this time, since a lot of us are spending more time on social media, it might be a little bit more-- we can see it a little bit more.

Mia:

No, we can see it a little bit more. You have to face it instead of having to run away from it or it being thinly veiled, as I was saying before, and being like, "Oh, it's just-- it has to do with health. People just want you to be healthy. People just want you to eat better." Are you eating better and working out for yourself? Or are you just scared of being fat? And if you're scared of being fat, does it have to do with your health or because you understand and know how fat people are treated and how fat people are viewed within the society and beauty standards that currently exist? The more I think about it, the more I reflect on my own biases, especially within this project, and COVID in itself... So, we were talking before. Do you have any theories that go along with this? Because I know, when we started this project and talking about COVID and everything like that, we did a whole bunch of research, and Marie actually had all these really awesome theories that we were able to connect the dots with.

Marie:

Yes. So, for anybody out there, who is really into theories-- I know it's not for everybody. Some people find theories very boring, but-- so if you do, you can skip ahead. But for me, theories are always really interesting. We do a lot of it in our degree-- connecting theories to real life. And so, I came across this theory called self-discrepancy theory, and it's also tied into escape theory. So basically, how it connects to body image is self-discrepancy theory states that we have three selves. So, it's the actual self, the ideal self, and the ought self, and if we pay attention, specifically to the ideal and actual self, we can see, that's where the discrepancies may arise. So, the ideal self is constructed by cultural norms that create beauty standards, so how everybody kind of has this ideal beauty standard that constructs your ideal self. That's who you kind of want to become. And the actual self is how you perceive yourself to be. So, when you feel like your actual self fails to embody the ideal self that is created by these beauty standards, there is self-discrepancy that may lead-- and the self-discrepancy-- you may try to engage in behaviours that fix this discrepancy. So, this also kind of ties into something we might talk about a little bit later-- but it also ties into eating disorders. So, when you mix the self-discrepancy theory-- so you're experiencing self-discrepancy between the actual and the-- sorry, the ideal and the actual self, escape theory states that individuals will try to cope or escape the awareness of this discrepancy between the ideal and actual self.

And this might be, for example, engaging in disordered eating, to try to ease that discrepancy that you notice. So, that's very a long-winded explanation of the theory, but hopefully that makes some sense.

Mia:

Well, yeah. And it's true, though, is that people have an ideal version of themselves that don't necessarily match up, and I think that social media has skewed how we see ourselves versus what we actually look like. You have Instagram filters. You have editing tools. You have Photoshop, to create this fantasy, and this beauty standard that doesn't exist, because nobody looks like that. Even Kylie Jenner doesn't look like that. Kylie Jenner doesn't look like Kylie Jenner. And people put these photos out on the internet, and it just feeds into this really toxic narrative where you're looking at yourself, you're looking at your mirror, and you just don't recognize who you see and that can be dangerous.

Marie:

And I've actually seen this-- so, it kind of ties into the whole being on social media and seeing these beauty standards and how dangerous it can be. There's a study done since-- on social media using body image and self-esteem since COVID-19. It was a fairly big sample, 2600 people, and it was noted among all these people that there was a significant increase seen in social media use and in the number of women following appearance-focused Instagram accounts. It was-- the use of social media was either associated with body dissatisfaction or a drive for thinness and/or low self-esteem. So, social media use and looking at these appearance-focused Instagram accounts was shown, in the study, to be extremely harmful to your self-esteem and to your body image.

Mia:

Especially because they don't even look like that, so you're constantly comparing yourself against somebody that doesn't even look like who the person that they're portraying online. No, I definitely-- before this project and a lot of self-reflection, I'm definitely guilty of that. I would follow fast fashion accounts and celebrities like Kim Kardashian, who would be promoting diet culture and this unhealthy beauty standard, without even knowing it: ingrained in our culture. When we were talking to a community member, she was talking about how-- body talk and how we normalize body talk and talking about our bodies and how females create relationships on that and me and Marie were reflecting on it after the conversation. We had this amazing conversation after this curious conversation. And it's true how often you relate to a girl you see in the restaurant like, "Oh my goodness. I'm looking so big today," or, "Oh, I hate my nose," and "I hate my nose, too." You're creating a friendship and you're creating this tie with someone based on how you hate your appearance. Isn't that so toxic? When you really pull that apart isn't that so toxic and so unhealthy to do? And it's hard. It's really, really hard to get past it because most of the friendships that you have within your family-- within your friends are based on communally hating each other's bodies.

Marie:

I don't think, before that conversation, I had ever really thought about how I've connected with my friends or family over negative body talk. And when that was brought up, I kind of had to sit and think about it. I was like, "I've engaged in that talk before, and

I didn't even think about it." Making fun of my body, and my friends making fun of their body, and it's just normalized. That's how we talk about our bodies.

Mia:

And just the compliments that form around it. Especially with COVID, I've noticed this saying that people say, "You're looking so skinny today," or "skinny Queen." They're using skinny as like the end all be all compliment. And I'm not saying that there's anything wrong with being skinny. There's nothing wrong with being skinny. But when you say that you're just perpetuating this thing that being seen as larger is bad and that skinny is the end all be all compliment. That you should strive for being skinny. And a lot of people would say, "Oh, it's not that deep, like, don't look into stuff like that." But it's true. When you sit back and you truly analyze the conversations you're having with people, and how you form these relationships, it's deeply embedded in insecurities and hating each other's bodies together... Throughout this project, and throughout us talking about diet culture, how have you tried to practice healthy body image within social media?

Marie:

Honestly, I have started unfollowing some social media accounts. I've started following social media accounts that are more body neutral, or that show diverse bodies, because, first of all, I want to support them, and make their platforms bigger so then other people can also enjoy the content that they post. So, I think that's been one major thing is following and unfollowing accounts. I've also spent far less time on social media. I've tried-- I struggle with the social media cleanses, because I feel like I'm so attached, especially since COVID. That's how I see what people are doing, and that's how I connect with friends that I haven't connected to in a while. And-- but I've definitely tried to spend less time on social media so that I'm not viewing as much of that content. And I think just in starting this project, I've tried to lean more into body neutrality, which we'll be talking about in another podcast episode-- so stay tuned-- but I've definitely tried practicing body neutrality a little bit more. What about you Mia? What have you been practicing?

Mia:

I've really tried to absolve myself of guilt around food, because I think one of the biggest things that I've gotten from COVID is a really bad impact with diet culture, and just eating healthy and staying away from all these foods. So, I have to remind myself my body is innocent. My body is a body. I'm allowed to treat my body. I'm not going to suddenly get bigger if I eat this brownie, and if I do get bigger, that there's nothing wrong with that because at the end of the day my body is a vessel and I'm more than the compounds of my body. I've really been trying to think about what my body can do for me, and how I can reward my body. Because a lot of the times people punish themselves with food, they say, "I can't eat that. Pasta has so many calories. I can't eat that. I'm going to gain like 20 pounds." And I've realized within this project and us reading all these amazing books and podcasts-- which is in our recommendations tab. Everyone should check that out-- that I need to stop having this bias about myself. Why is it okay for other bigger bodies to celebrate themselves, but if I become a bigger body, suddenly I have no self-worth. And I think me reflecting on that and realizing that any body type is okay, even if it's on myself has really taken a self-awareness turn point within myself. So, throughout COVID it's been a journey and now with this project, it's

made me reflect on a lot of things and that has definitely helped. Especially when we had that conversation with another community member about-- that food shouldn't be a war, and you should eat when you're hungry and listen to your body's cues. And it's so simple and yet, I never thought of it like that. Isn't that crazy? Here we are depriving our bodies of all this nutrition and things that we want because we're scared to be bigger? Because we're scared suddenly that we're not worthy or beautiful? Now that I actually think about it I'm like, how silly was I to be denying myself? Because I'm scared of being bigger? And what's wrong with being bigger? What's wrong with being bigger than I am? Bodies will change over your lifetime and that's okay.

Marie:

I'm sorry. Just to jump in there for a second. When you were talking about that community member who was talking about intuitive eating, I think some of the-- some of my favourite quotes that they said and that I think everybody should hear and everybody should really take to heart is, "I'm not eating to control my body," and also, "I'm eating for my internal needs."

Mia:

Yes, and I think a lot of people miss that. I think a lot of people realize-- don't realize, sorry, that we're a living organism and we need nutrition. We need sustenance. It's like if you take a plant away from sunlight, and you're like, "Oh, sorry, that's enough. We don't want your roots to grow bigger. We're going to deprive you of sunlight." And then what? How is that fair to the plant? The plant is meant to be in the sun, as is everyone else meant to eat.

Marie:

And I think to tie this conversation back into COVID, a little bit, and how-- what COVID has done to our body image. If we take that conversation, and we kind of talk about diet culture and BMI. BMI is a little outdated. So, both of us here I think are-- don't particularly like that way of looking at people's weight. But during the pandemic, statements have been made about "obese" and that was the word that was used-- "obese" individuals being at higher risk when it comes to COVID. And what I want to ask everybody is... is this actually true? Or is this fatphobia? Because if you think about it BMI is outdated. There's numerous scholars who have talked about this, and we're still using this BMI range "obese" as a health status during this pandemic, even with the research in this area, and by in this area I mean obesity linked to more risk of COVID-- harsh COVID symptoms, that research is very sparse.

Mia:

Yeah, when you told me that about people-- doctors saying like, "Oh, you're more risk for COVID or worse COVID symptoms because of how much you weigh." And it's-- there's no research backing that up. There's-- it's literally just people drenched in their own fatphobia and discrimination and they're projecting it on those who are bigger and larger.

Marie:

Yeah. So yeah, with these limited studies, and this fatphobia being kind of pushed out on other people, this article I was reading pointed out that there were linked BMI and heart disease. But the other thing that this article mentioned was to kind of think about these health issues. And could these also be affected by weight bias in the medical field and people with larger bodies not wanting to reach out for help from the medical field

when they are experiencing symptoms of some sort of health concern because they are scared of that fatphobia from the medical field.

Mia:

And that just goes back to the difference between being perceived as skinny versus fat and how being called larger, perceived larger, and being called fat is different than skinny. Because with COVID we've seen the rise and falls of people saying, "Oh, this girl called me skinny today, and I was so offended." And being called fat and being perceived as fat has way bigger implications within your life, like being discriminated against in the medical community, not being able to find the right clothes, not being looked at. No one makes eye contact with you on buses and public transits and things like that. And it's just not even within the same sphere, and yet people will make that comparison, "Oh, well, I'm insecure about being skinny." But I think people don't realize that being insecure isn't the end all be all of the worst things to happen. It's a horrible thing. You are insecure. But that doesn't have horrible implications of your life like being denied medical help. I read this in the book that I was reading-- it's on the recommendation tab-- by Aubrey Gordon. I'm horrible with names. And she made a point where the worst thing that a skinny white woman could be, is fat, and that is her fear. And the worst thing that a fat woman or man has is being denied medical procedures and being oppressed and discriminated against their whole life. And within that, the weight of both of them are significantly different.

Marie:

Maybe we could get into the whole diet culture talk. And I'll start with a good definition of diet culture that I found by Alexandra Hawke and she explains the diet culture is-- and I want everybody to pay attention to this definition-- a system of beliefs, that encourages self-optimization through weight loss. So, diet culture is almost this belief that weight loss will bring happiness and health.

Mia:

But diet culture has just impacted us so much that people think that by losing weight, they're going to fix all their problems. They're going to be healthier. They're going to get that job. They're going to get that person that they've been crushing without realizing the impact that has on their body, first of all. You can't just live off of fruits. People need more sustenance and that...

Marie:

And the thing that diet culture doesn't talk about is that diets fail in most cases. And, also, diets-- it can lead to a lifelong struggle with food. I was looking at this study about dieting among 14- to 15-year-olds and it was a big predictor of eating disorders. And even the community member that we were talking to-- diet culture-- this idea of weight gain was so ingrained in them that it led to this immense fear of gaining weight, and therefore, issues with body image. But that's what diet culture doesn't talk about. It talks about losing weight, and how-- bring health and happiness to your life, but it doesn't talk about how diets fail and how-- the damage that can do to your mental health.

Mia:

It just uses health as a backdrop or just lies and says this is health. And a lot of people always say, "What is health? How can you be healthy?" And it just poses the question, through the things like Dr. Phil and Dr. Oz or it's this new weight loss supplement and blah, blah, blah... is that health? Is being skinnier, truly healthy? Personally, when I

think about health-- and it ties into diet, culture and stuff-- health is what you mean it to be. I'm able to get up every single day and make myself breakfast and feel good about myself. To me that is health. I'm able to accomplish the things that need to be done.

Marie:

And something else that I really wanted to talk about, and what-- that was one of the trends that we've been seeing during COVID. Mia and I have talked about this a bit-- is that there's been studies that have shown how the pandemic could possibly be exasperating symptoms or behaviours of eating disorders. And this is seen, for example, in a study looking at posts on Reddit and an eating disorder-related forum, discussing COVID's effects on mental health and eating disorders. There were some concerns among individuals about, for example, the disruption of treatment for their eating disorder during COVID, which I think has been a roadblock for some people-- is reaching out for help during COVID. How do you get help for eating disorder behaviours or symptoms? And there's also been food availability and insecurity during COVID, which has posed difficulties like low supplies of safe foods or concerns with compulsive urges with the stockpiling of food. And then there's also been issues with changes in routine and lack of coping mechanisms available for individuals. And yeah, because of this, we've been seeing a rise of eating disorder symptoms and behaviours, which is very concerning.

Mia:

And a lot of people won't admit that they have. It's hard to admit that you have an eating disorder, I should say rather, because a lot of the time because of diet culture, we're seeing that it's health. We're seeing that restricting your diet and only eating certain things is the end all be all of health and that's just not the case. And I think with COVID it's normalized eating disorders in a way and made it seem like this is healthy, and it's not. It's not at all. And if you see-- if you know of someone and you see that they're going to the gym three times a day and that they don't get the nutrients they need, or they're restricting their diet or they say things like, "Oh, I can't eat that, that's not good for me", it would be good to have a conversation with them about body image and talk to them about safe gym-going and safe working out. So, they don't overexert themselves in the name of health.

Marie:

Another concerning trend to keep on with the eating disorder trend is that some people have reported that eating disorder treatments are not overly culturally sensitive and that cultural sensitivity can mean a lot of different things to a lot of different people. But unfortunately, there's not been a lot of research on eating disorders for people of colour, especially women of colour, and the lack of research-- and I think even research during COVID. I haven't really found any studies-- makes it hard to create adequate programs that are focused on social justice and oppression and historical trauma that also impact eating disorders. And with COVID already kind of impacting the amount of treatment that's out there, or the availability of treatment that's out there, that's also concerning for people that they can't find the treatment that fits their needs.

Mia:

Yes, when we first started doing this project, as well, and we were gathering research and everything like that, it was really hard to find voices of people of colour-- from different ethnicities and different cultures, within the body image movement-- within the

body image conversation even. Because obviously, different cultures and different ethnicities have different ways that they view their body and what they deem is beautiful and acceptable but finding that niche within North America was impossible. It was impossible. I could only find little snippets of things here and there, but nothing concrete that we could bring to this project and bring to this conversation. And it just goes to show how little not only research has been done, but little room that has been made to allow that research to happen and for these voices and these people to be included in this conversation.

Marie:

Definitely. I was reading this article on Indigenous peoples and their struggles with eating disorders and the fact that their relationship with the land and with food, and then years of poverty, intergenerational trauma, and the white supremacist narrative have all put down their bodies. And it's a risk factor for eating disorder behavior, but it also pushes them away from these body image movements and doesn't really create a space for them, is what I was trying to say.

Mia:

Yeah, and the whole point-- and we'll be talking about this in the history of body positivity-- the whole point of these body image movements was to include people without voices. It was to give them a platform in which they could be celebrated. And now, if you literally search hashtag body positivity-- hashtag body image, you will find the ideal beauty standard: just this skinny, white, blue-eyed, blonde girl dancing to a TikTok song or something. And I'm not saying that those people shouldn't be celebrated as well, but the whole point of these movements-- and the whole point was to include people who aren't celebrated, who aren't rooted in this realist-- this ideal beauty standard.

Marie:

So, I think before we wrap up this podcast episode, I did want to come-- I did want to push some ideas that were given to us by some of our community members. We can be practicing good body image during COVID, and I would like to start by saying that one of our community members mentioned intentionality, which I thought was great. And so, intentionality-- by intentionality, they mean on social media, which social media, they mentioned, can be an echo chamber of what you're listening to. So be intentional about the media-- the social media that you consume. Follow people who represent what you want to do in your everyday life: regular life things or people who are destigmatizing marginalized bodies, or people that are not like you. It's okay to follow people who are not like you to get exposed to diverse bodies. So, say, for example, you're an able-bodied individual. Follow someone who's disabled. Learn what their life is like and avoid perpetuating that stereotype that is seen on TV by learning about these people's lives and what they actually go through especially with body image and during COVID. What is that like for them? And Mia did you have anything from community members that really stuck with you?

Mia:

I think one of the biggest things that I got from the community member is that although social media can be damaging, you also control your own social media. If you notice certain trends that are impacting you negatively or you think are having a bad impact on your life, unfollow them, block them. If your social media affects so much of your life,

why would you want it to bring negative things within yourself and how you view others. Something that I've been really doing-- I'm really big into fashion. I've been following plus-sized fashion accounts. I've been following ethically sourced fashion accounts. I've been following people who just cook to cook, who love cooking. And that has brought joy within my life and something that I really enjoy seeing. Social media doesn't just have to be negative. It can be a tool to educate yourself and educate others.

Marie:

And one last thing that I would also like to throw in that a community member said, that I think is really important to keep in mind during COVID, is that people have mistaken COVID to be-- for a time to be productive, when it's really been-- and they described it as traumatic for all of us. So, trauma does not equal productivity. So, during COVID, if you are not always making it to the gym, or if you're so overwhelmed after working on the computer all day, doing your job, that you can't make a full five-course meal that's super healthy and full of veggies and whatever that you think might be diet culture approved, that's okay. It's okay that you're not going to the gym all the time, during COVID or maybe that you're gaining some weight. That's okay and you don't have to be upset about that.

Mia:

You don't have to apologize for it either. You should just live your life unapologetically within the body that you have and do the things that are accessible to you. You don't have to be writing huge novels or, like Marie was saying, going to the gym every day. It's okay just to exist. You don't need to prove your existence to anybody... Well, thank you so much for listening to our COVID podcast and we invite you to look at our other podcasts and our information sheets and our recommendations. This has been Mia...

Marie:

And Marie...

Mia:

And thank you so much for listening and have an awesome day.

[32:26]

[Music]

This transcript is clean verbatim. Unneeded fillers like "um", "like", "you know", "mhhh", and repeated words are omitted