Consumerism = An approach to life in which buying goods and services and cultivating the image associated with those goods and services are primary sources of our identity or our way of experiencing the world. This way of living requires considerable time and effort be directed toward making purchasing choices (buying “the brand”), achieving “the look,” using and being seen using the latest technology, etc. In turn, these preoccupations decrease the time and energy available for self-reflection, self-care, and other important aspects of life such as those related to obligations and responsibilities in the areas of citizenship, family life, and community involvement.

Many people of all ages have developed unhealthy lifestyle habits and are not achieving and maintaining a healthy weight. Given these serious concerns, it’s important to ask, Is it possible our culture is part of the problem?

Said another way, Does our society encourage us – maybe even push us – to have unhealthy lifestyles?

One of the research findings from Wellness IN the Rockies (WIN the Rockies) is that contemporary society encourages lifestyles that make it hard to achieve and maintain a healthy weight. WIN the Rockies research also identified consumerism as the source of many obstacles to healthy, enjoyable lifestyles. Consumerism (see definition at left) is a dominant aspect of American society and other contemporary cultures.

This publication discusses some of the factors that discourage healthy lifestyles related to food, physical activity, and body image in a consumer-oriented society. It also offers suggestions about what we can do about these negative influences.

Lifestyles based on healthy attitudes and behaviors associated with physical activity, food and eating, and body image offer many benefits, including improved psychological well-being and reduced risk for problems such as heart disease, high blood pressure, and osteoporosis. These healthy lifestyles also can help people achieve a healthy weight.
Pressures All Around

Media. The mass media include TV, radio, magazines, movies, newspapers, and, now, the Internet. These methods of communication reach far into American households. Their messages exert a profound influence on what we value, what we think we need and want, and how we live our life. Each day we are confronted with countless media images that show and tell us how we should look, what we should buy, and how our lives should appear to ourselves and others.

Advertising. To fuel a culture of consumption, advertisers bombard us with commercial messages. Estimates of the exposure to ads range as high as 3,000 per person per day. Advertisers want to convince us that, in order to feel happy and successful, we need the latest products, gadgets, fashions, “looks,” etc. These all seem new, but they are the ever-changing new that are, in reality, always the same.

Among their many tactics, advertisers seek to make us feel insecure about our appearance. They then provide a range of products and services, supposedly to help us rid ourselves of those unwanted feelings. Ensuring that consumers feel a sense of inadequacy is essential to the process. Nowhere are

Values = Principles, standards, or qualities considered worthwhile or desirable.

Examples of critiquing real-life experiences in terms of virtual models instead of vice-versa

“I’d love to look like Cindy Crawford. It is not going to happen … Basic training was a huge thing for me because before I always thought, ‘I can lose more weight, I can lose more weight.’ And I was very, very physically active … I came out of [basic training] weighing like 180 pounds … I was in really, really good shape and my body fat percentage was down pretty low and I thought, ‘Okay … I’m just not going to be a real tiny petite person. That’s all there is to it’ … All this time I thought I could just keep losing … [but] I was in really good shape and felt really good … [even though] I was way heavier than I thought I was supposed to be … [My mother] says if [my sister and I] would have been in a different time period, [men] would have really went after us because we’re good at having babies and all that stuff, and I’m like, ‘Yeah, yeah, yeah. I’d still rather look like Cindy Crawford.”

WIN the Rockies interviewee, female, mid-30s

More on societal pressure: Thin at any cost

“My friend is like a chimney … because she’s so afraid of gaining weight. I keep trying to get her to quit smoking. She says, ‘I would rather be dying of lung cancer and be skinny.’”

WIN the Rockies interviewee, female, mid-30s
these ways of thinking more pronounced than in the area of body image, where marketing for the beauty industry cultivates powerful feelings of not measuring up to an arbitrary ideal. As noted by artist and culture critic Larry Kirkwood, “Encouraging body hatred is an extremely lucrative business.”

Advertisers also prey on people’s deep longings to live meaningful and morally upstanding lives. They inundate us with promises that our lives will be good and happy and fulfilling if we look or live a certain way, which, again, the products and services supposedly ensure.

The need to feel filled up. As a consequence, many people turn to consumer items to try to fill an emptiness they feel – a lack of meaning or significance in their lives. Despite these attempts to fill voids with things like chocolate, a new car, the latest cell phone, a new outfit, or the vision of having a so-called ideal body – all of which may offer immediate pleasure or satisfaction – consumer items are not capable of providing lasting fulfillment and meaning in life. Unfortunately, this is precisely the illusion marketing and advertising sell to consumers.

More on media pressure: Unhealthy eating habits and self-image

“Growing up, I just liked eating. And it went along with watching TV. They go together, you know … Just sitting at home watching TV – that’s how I spent most of my adolescent years … For me, the TV … just made overeating worse. It became such an important part of my life … It’s a bizarre form of human contact. You feel like you are a part of something. You’re not, of course, but you feel like you are.”

WIN the Rockies interviewee, male, late 30s

More on self-reflection: Food and eating

“I definitely view food differently than I used to. I pay more attention to when I am full. I don’t worry as much about not eating certain things. I don’t worry about craving something and not being able to eat it. I just know when to stop.”

Steps to A New You participant®
Contradiction and confusion. Our consumer-oriented society is organized around ease, comfort, and immediate gratification. Furthermore, as the pace of life in our society accelerates, juggling day-to-day demands seems to require two opposite ways of thinking and living:

- On one hand, in our work lives, we are supposed to have highly developed skills related to productivity, self-discipline, and delayed gratification (work now for reward later).
- In contrast, advertising and other media images that surround us encourage a pleasure-seeking way of life dedicated to immediate gratification and self-indulgence.

The ambivalence, confusion, and distortion of values caused by the clash of these two ways of being in the world present a difficult challenge to even the most well-adjusted individuals.

What Can We Do?

We need to engage in self-reflection (see definition at lower left). We need to think carefully about our everyday habits and the routines we follow without question. Then, if we choose to do so, we can work toward developing habits and ways of thinking based on a more conscious, self-directed life.

Example of food-related self-reflection

- **Understand our hunger.** Recognizing the desire to “feel filled up” can be strong and food satisfies only one type of hunger, before we start eating, we should ask ourselves, “What are we really hungry for?”
  - If our stomach is hungry, we need nourishing food.
  - If our mind is hungry, we need mental stimulation.
  - If our body is hungry for physical activity, we need to move.
  - If we are hungry for companionship, we need to reach out to a friend.
  - If we are hungry to be by ourselves, we need to find some space.
  - If we feel hungry spiritually, we need to find meaning in what we are doing.
  - If we feel hungry for creativity, we need to invent something or do something imaginative.

- For full details of this and other self-reflection activities, go to *Full of Ourselves*.1
Examples of physical activity-related self-reflection

- Understand our motives to be physically active. Psychological and social motivations may not be why we start moving, but, often, they are the reasons we continue. Identifying the source of our motivations can help us incorporate daily physical activity into our lifestyle. For example, the table below summarizes a self-assessment tool that helps users identify their primary motives to move within several categories and then provides guidance as to the type of physical activity that matches each motive.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motive to be physically active</th>
<th>Examples of activities to explore</th>
<th>Key characteristic(s) of activities to explore</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feel better about self</td>
<td>Walking, gardening, swimming, rowing, Rollerblading, yoga, mountain biking, tai chi, hiking</td>
<td>Allow you to set the standard and go at your own pace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accomplish worthwhile goal</td>
<td>Weight training, skiing, swimming, mountain biking, hiking, gardening</td>
<td>Are challenging with noticeable outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control moods and ease tension</td>
<td>Swimming, walking, skiing, hiking, tai chi, yoga, Rollerblading, stretching, skating, gardening</td>
<td>Are non-competitive, aerobic, and repetitive or designed to relax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel young; maintain vitality</td>
<td>Swimming, yoga, low-impact aerobics, cross training, pilates</td>
<td>Use the whole body and stress flexibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have fun and encourage playful spirit</td>
<td>Skating, Frisbee, jazz dance, non-competitive games, square dancing, belly dancing, softball</td>
<td>Are game-like or encourage self-expression and can make you laugh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interact with others</td>
<td>Ballroom and folk dancing, walking/hiking clubs, karate, group swims, basketball</td>
<td>Engage with others and allow you to feel their support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connect with nature</td>
<td>Walking, hiking, snow-shoeing, cross-country skiing, gardening</td>
<td>Get you outdoors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For more information on matching motives to physical activity, go to *The Exercise Habit*, *Moving Away from Diets*, and *A New You: Health for Every Body*.

More on self-reflection: Body image

“... When you wish that you look like someone else ... it just chips away your self-confidence ...

WIN the Rockies interviewee, female, early 20s

More on self-reflection: Body image

“... We can’t all be models, and we can’t all be beautiful people ... I think you need to appreciate yourself for what you are and for the talents you have.”

WIN the Rockies interviewee, male, mid-50s
Expand the meaning of “productivity.” Some individuals feel the need for all their physical activity to be productive; in other words, they see physical activity as a waste of time unless associated with work or accomplishing a task. If you are such a person, you may want to consider broadening your perspective: for instance, allow yourself to view physical activity as productive because it contributes to good health. This is still consistent with valuing productivity because good health can maximize your ability to do work and accomplish tasks.

Example of body image-related self-reflection

Appreciate undervalued body parts1. Many people – men as well as women – view their body negatively and specifically dislike one or more parts of their body. If you are such a person, think about a part of your body you dislike. Then imagine your life without this part of your body. Ask yourself some important questions, for example:

- What positive experiences in your life would you not have had?
- What would you not be able to do in the future without this part of your body?

Then think about how you might think or behave differently in the future to better value this part of your body. For full details about this and similar self-reflection activities, go to Working with Groups to Explore Food and Body Connections12.

More on self-reflection: Physical activity and maintaining vitality

“I’m not going to get old gracefully... When my wife and I reach the golden years, I want to be physically fit so we can enjoy our lives. I see too many people who, once they reach a certain age, their whole social life... is based around their doctor appointments and that’s sad... You’re better off to stay physically fit.”

WIN the Rockies interviewee, male, early 40s
Finally, let’s consider good health to be an instrumental value; in other words, not something that is an end in itself or sought for its own sake. Rather, let’s look at good health as providing greater opportunities for us to pursue goals in life that we see as meaningful and significant. 

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1 Wellness IN the Rockies (WIN the Rockies) was a community-based research, intervention, and public service project in Wyoming, Idaho, and Montana that encouraged a health-focused (rather than a weight-focused) approach to well-being. For more information about WIN the Rockies, go to www.uwyo.edu/wintherockies; funded by USDA/IFAFS award #0004499.

2 As defined by Joanne Ikeda, retired from the University of California–Berkeley and UC–Berkeley’s Center for Weight and Health, “a healthy weight is the weight you achieve when you have a healthy lifestyle.” Accordingly, for some people, their healthy weight will be within a so-called “normal” range of body mass index (BMI). For others, their healthy weight will be outside that range. From this perspective, body weight is one important indicator of health, but there are other important indicators, too. These include blood pressure, levels of fats in the blood (for example, triglycerides, high-density lipoprotein [HDL], and low-density lipoprotein [LDL] cholesterol), fruit and vegetable intakes, frequency and duration of physical activity, etc. Additional publications in the Focus on Health, Not Weight series provide information on other aspects of healthy lifestyles related to physical activity, food and eating, and body image.

The WIN the Rockies project included a qualitative research component involving collection and analysis of narratives or life stories related to physical activity, food and eating, and body image. These narratives were gathered from 103 adults – 57 women and 46 men – in three of the project’s communities: Powell, Wyoming, Lewistown, Montana, and Preston, Idaho. These individuals ranged from 17 to 87 years of age. For a published compilation of the key quotations from all the life stories, see Let Their Voices Be Heard: Quotations from life stories related to physical activity, food and eating, and body image by Holmes B., Pelican S., and Vanden Heede F. Chicago: Discovery Association Publishing House, 2005.


Steps to A New You was an applied research project funded by WIN the Rockies.


A downloadable version of this publication is available at: www.uwyo.edu/CES/PUBS/MP112-6.pdf.