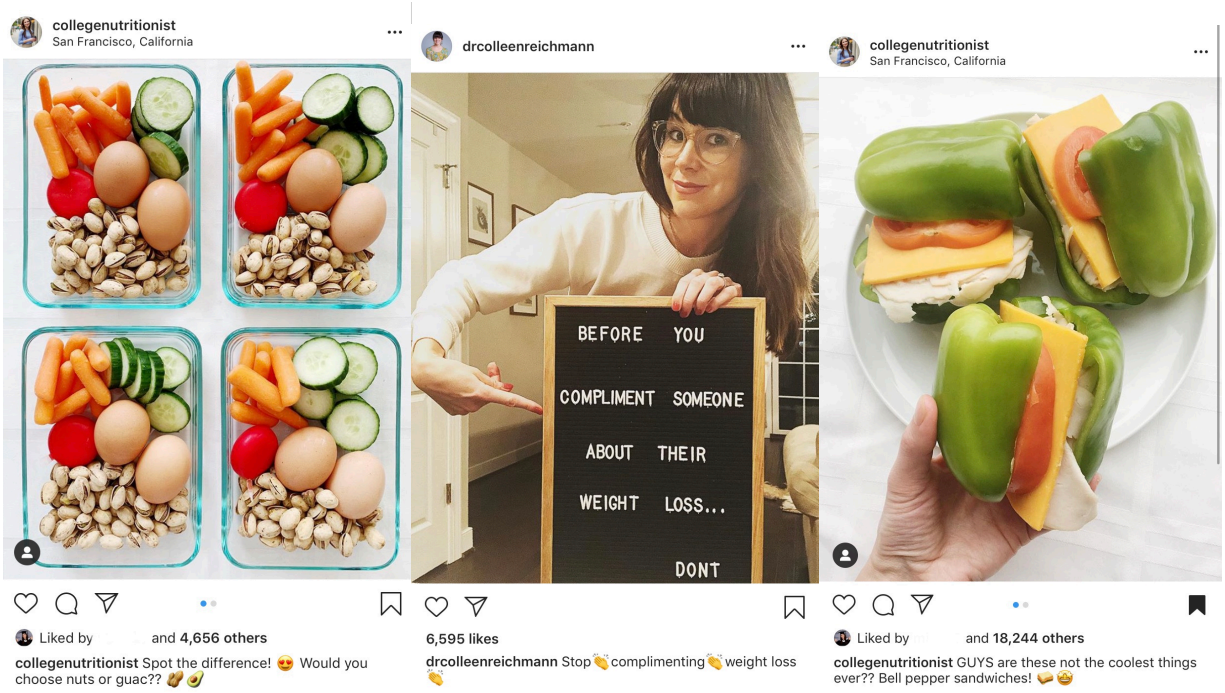
“If It Smells Like a Diet”: Instagram, Diet Culture, and Thinness as a Moral Imperative

by Caroline Curran



The “explore” page on my Instagram follows a predictable pattern. It knows what I like—cockapoos, Taylor Swift paparazzi photos, lithe yogis in crow pose. I could scroll for hours, overwhelmed with the comforting sameness of it all, the poreless faces and cloudless skies.

The most common squares on the never-ending grid, at least on my feed, are neat, colorful meals, posted by an account that’s some cutesy pun on the word “kale” or “chickpea” or “balanced.” Seasonal produce on white plates, runny egg yolks, ripe avocados: the holy trinity of macronutrients. Everything bathed in natural light, because it’s always sunny on Instagram. It’s the stuff of meal-prep, manicured hands, and a life of productivity.

I’m intrigued by one particular account—the College Nutritionist. I like to think I’m healthy, and I’m in college, after all. The first time I see her posts, I’m sucked in. There’s something intoxicating about it. When I talk on the phone with the College Nutritionist, I hear my voice rise a full octave, meeting hers, like it’s a competition for which of us can be the *most* accommodating, the *most* pleasant, the *most* charming.

The College Nutritionist, also known as Rachel Paul, PhD, RD, grew up outside Philadelphia. She completed her undergraduate, masters, and dietetic internship at Case Western Reserve University in 2013, the same year she started her professional account. Rachel finished her doctorate at Columbia this past year.

On Instagram, @collegenutritionist has 331k followers. Rachel also manages a website, a meal plan email subscription, and a Facebook group devoted to her program, the “Best Body”

program. “I never ever thought that this is what I would be doing with all my degrees,” she says. “But it's really fun and I love it. And I'm trying to make it a sustainable business.”

A sustainable business in this field requires a few things. An awareness of food trends is key. Rachel tells me the first three that pop into her mind. “Well, recently there's been a lot of, like, anti-dairy, so I tried to address that and clear up some misconceptions with that,” Rachel says. “And then, I still get a lot of questions about whether dietary fat is bad to eat—like ‘will fat make you fat’ type of thing. And then there is a realm of intuitive eating and I definitely try to address things there.”

Another thing is marketing yourself—your face, your personality, your own idiosyncratic use of emojis. That was a learning curve, Rachel tells me. She’s introverted. Talking to her phone, smiling for the front-facing camera, filming snippets of her daily routines—none of it comes naturally.

“I really resisted it for a long time,” she says. “But I have come to really appreciate how vital that piece of it is, to making sure that you come across as a real person and not just a brand.” She had gotten comments asking if she was a real person, which was distressing. Rachel tells me about a book that really inspires her, *Expert Secrets: The Underground Playbook for Creating a Mass Movement of People Who Will Pay for Your Advice* by Russell Brunson. “He talks about being the hero of your company and just being a real person,” Rachel says. “Like a *real* person that people can interact with.”

Awareness of trends and marketing personality can only be part of the equation, though. An essential part of creating content is attracting people to that content—gaining followers, likes, engagement on posts. “I do think a really good way to be in business is to have a clear objective and to serve a specific target audience,” Rachel says. “I really wanted to give back to this specific population.”

That population, according to the College Nutritionist’s Instagram bio, is, unsurprisingly, “students & grads.” Young adults. People without time, without resources. But more specifically—given that emails from the College Nutritionist greet subscribers with “Hey lady!” and “Hey girl!”—it’s young women, women without time, women who want ease and logic and guidelines.

The College Nutritionist, therefore, makes food simple. “I think that a big draw is the simplicity,” Rachel says. “A lot of stuff online is detailed and has, like, twenty-five steps and thirty ingredients and difficult-to-find ingredients.” For lunch and dinner, the College Nutritionist recommends a formula:

2 cups non-starchy vegetables (about 50 calories total)
1 “regular” serving of protein (about 150 calories total)
100-200 calories of fats

You can see examples of the formula on Instagram. A meal might be a handful of baby carrots, sliced cucumber, two hardboiled eggs, and a round of cheese encased in red wax. It’s all arranged in a rectangle of tupperware. On screen, it satisfies all the visual requirements of a successful food post: bright primary colors, precise geometry. “I found that it resonates with people just because it's very easy,” Rachel says.

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At a coffee shop in Old City, I show the College Nutritionist’s formula to Jenny Weinar. Jenny describes herself as a body-positive psychotherapist and a licensed clinical social worker. She recently started a private practice in Philadelphia. She looks like my therapist, which is something I want to tell her but do not. She looks at the screen for a moment, where I have the College Nutritionist’s Best Body program pulled up. I scroll down the page. It’s your typical promotional

language: *I finally was able to figure out what I really wanted— true happiness and bliss, and a mind free of food thoughts. There is so much more to life than constantly thinking about food, SO MUCH more!* That last part in bold.

Jenny frowns at the screen. "So my immediate reaction is they're saying to not obsess over every meal and snack and then they're posting every meal and snack," she says. "And to have a predetermined meal plan is just so cut off from hearing what someone's body needs and getting in tune with its signals."

But the College Nutritionist speaks the language of body positivity—focus on your relationship with food, prioritize self-care, achieve *true happiness and bliss*. Could it be empowering? I wonder aloud. Jenny shakes her head. "I think these are actually some of the most dangerous because they're really sneaky," she says. "They sort of talk about body positivity, but if it's through the lens of weight loss or weight control, it's really dangerous."

The Best Body program mostly concerns weight loss, it seems. At the bottom of the Best Body information page is a link to the program itself: *If you want to learn more about living you* [sic] *happiest, most fulfilled life, I'd love for you to check out my weight loss program, HERE!* Happiness, fulfillment, weight loss—got it.

But why is this "dangerous," according to Jenny?

"I think that promoting intentional weight loss is harmful no matter what," Jenny says. "As soon as weight loss becomes the goal, it just inspires disordered behavior that's not sustainable. And, and it primes the body for this fear of starvation and famine and almost inevitably backfires."

When I talk to Rachel about the Best Body program, I ask her about the name of the program, the implications of the superlative. She repeats what she had written to me in an email.

"Like I had said to you when I emailed you, in whatever depth to means to you—to the person—that's what I'm trying to get across," Rachel says. "So however you feel best in your body is perfect to me. Whether that is weight loss, whether that is being regular, whether that is not being bloated, whatever that means to you. That is perfect outcome to me."

The College Nutritionist's website suggests otherwise—achieve your best body by maintaining your "ideal weight," and then achieve bliss.

I look back over the rules of thumb for achieving bliss.

Principle 1: One starchy food per day. This includes not only the typical culprits—rice, bread, pasta—but some vegetables and beans, too. Careful with your potatoes, and don't overdo it on the hummus.

Principle 2: One fruit per day. Apparently, fruits have "2, 3, 4, 5 times as many calories as non-starchy vegetables, and they're not really any more filling." I did not know this. I consider the orange I had with breakfast.

Principle 3: Don't drink your calories.

Principle 4: Breakfast - Focus on protein & fats

Principle 5: Lunch and Dinner Formula

I consider the irony of all of this and of the whole program. Enforce formulas so you can eat spontaneously. Set rules so you can eat intuitively. Read a book to learn how to come across as a real person. And underneath all of this, the "danger" that Jenny alluded to, what could be maybe, potentially, possibly problematic, is the disordered thoughts that the program (and the Instagram feed, and the idea of a best body in the first place) might inspire.

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The fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5), published in 2013, provides the most up-to-date catalogue of eating disorders recognized by the American

Psychiatric Association. The culmination of fourteen years of revision, the DSM-5 broadened its consideration of eating and feeding disorders from the previous DSM-4, revising the diagnostic criteria for anorexia nervosa and adding binge eating disorder as a new category of eating disorder. Before this update, many patients would receive a catch-all diagnosis of "eating disorder otherwise not specified"; the goal with these revisions is to improve the accuracy of diagnoses so that patients can receive necessary treatment.

But many manifestations of disordered eating still don't fit into the neat categories proposed by the DSM-5. Jenny Weinar focuses her private practice on these cases. "I've been in private practice for a year now, focusing on eating disorders, but also the broader spectrum of disordered eating, which includes chronic dieting, body image disturbances, and orthorexia, which is the new obsession with wellness and quote-unquote clean eating, but when it's really taken to sort of pathological level," Jenny says. "Those things that aren't technically considered a classic eating disorder but are really problematic and really harmful to a lot of people."

And these nonclassified manifestations of disordered eating don't receive the same medical attention that anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and now, binge eating disorder, do. "They're just not necessarily something that insurance companies would recognize as a formal diagnosis because they're not in the DSM," Jenny says. "But I see them as just as—I mean, they might not be as immediately physically threatening in the way that anorexia or bulimia might be, but emotionally and mentally, they can really wreak havoc on someone's life."

A few days after meeting with Jenny, I talk over the phone with Dr. Colleen Reichmann, a clinical psychologist working in Philadelphia and specializing in eating disorders and body image issues. Ninety-five percent of her caseload is people with eating disorders, she tells me. Three years ago, after completing her postdoctoral fellowship, Colleen started an Instagram account called @drcolleenreichmann.

"It was kind of a fun thing," she says. "It was kind of a distraction because I was getting my caseload buildup and I didn't have much going on. But also, there weren't as many clinical psychologist accounts out there and I thought it would be a really cool way to offer little tips and tricks and things like that in terms of self care and rejecting diet culture."

Since then, @drcolleenreichmann has amassed 31.9k followers. Her bio reads: *Clinical psychologist • Founder of Wildflower Therapy • Talkin' ED recovery, Health at Every Size, fat positivity, feminism and body liberation • she/her.*

I ask Colleen why she maintains this account—it's a side gig, after all. Like Rachel, the College Nutritionist, Colleen is highly educated, and she has her own private practice.

"Because I've never taken insurance—I'm private pay—and I have been since I've been in private practice. I've experienced some conflicting feelings about that," she says. "So the goal was to be able to provide more of a free resource, putting it out there for the masses." Volunteer work, she explains.

Creating the posts take a lot of time—researching what's most relevant and helpful to her audience, formatting, boiling down techniques from dialectical behavioral therapy into a pithy phrase. A scroll through her posts shows mostly squares of black text on a millenial-pink background. They say things like, *Life's too short to waste time cutting bananas in half and counting out almonds* and *Life hack: If you don't like running, you don't have to run*. Sometimes she'll post something cheeky on a letterboard, the kind that a corner cafe would post its daily specials onto.

Colleen's professional social media accounts let her create a presence online where she can connect with colleagues and where potential clients can find her. But Colleen is clear about the purpose of her account: a highlighted story in her bio reads, *This account is not meant to be a source of professional help. This is not a replacement for therapy. For that reason, I am unable to respond to DMs asking for therapeutic advice, feedback, suggestions, or support.* Followed by a list of resources.

She used to answer direct messages. Until about a year ago, Colleen would answer queries in "short and empathic ways." But things got complicated as her account grew. "I've had past clients follow the account, which is wonderful. It's a professional presence," she says. "But I just got to the point where I realized I have to make a black and white rule about that and not really answer any direct messages. It's unethical for me to be providing therapeutic advice through that forum."

Colleen doesn't even look at her DMs anymore, so she manages to ignore most of the critical messages she receives. Sometimes a post will go viral and Colleen will receive a slew of vitriol. For the most part, she says, "The criticism is not helpful. There's a lot of, *You're a bullshit doctor. You're promoting obesity, You're glorifying obesity*. Especially if I've posted jokes. I guess I've learned not to post as many jokes about specific diets like ketosis and things like that. People get really, really angry, very quickly."

There was a particular post that got a lot of attention: Written in all caps on the letterboard *Before you comment on someone's weight loss… Don't.* Colleen holds the rectangle in front of herself, looking at the camera from behind clear-rimmed glasses and pointing a red-fingernail at the text. In the caption, Colleen reiterates with words punctuated by the clapping emoji and an explanation: *When we brazenly make a comment about perceived weight-loss, we 1) assume it was intentional and 2) assume it has been a positive, non-disordered experience for the individual.*

And at the end of the caption, an addendum: *EDIT: due to the high volume of angry, negative comments on this post, I have turned comments off. I am a human person behind this account, and am not obligated to let folks spew hatred towards me/this message.*

The post hit a nerve, it seems. Colleen and I speculate as to the reason behind people's sensitivity. The way we all think about our bodies is intimate, but what motivates commenters to attack a post like this? Colleen mentions a book that helped her understand these mental processes, *The Gluten Lie: And Other Myths About What You Eat* by Alan Levinovitz, an associate professor of religion at James Madison University.

"It's this whole book on comparing diet mentality and adherence to strict diets to the new religion of millennials, and just the new religion in general," Colleen explains. "So understanding that when you critique diets, when someone's really invested in following it and has created a community around that diet, it feels like you're critiquing their religion. That helps me understand where those people are coming from."

It's why we can't set aside health sensationalism, why we're obsessed with manipulating our bodies, and maybe it's why I feel rage when the College Nutritionist posts pictures of sandwiches where instead of bread there is two halves of green bell pepper.

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Communities have always formed around diets—Weight Watchers, after all, with its frequent meetings and group solidarity, is older than my mother—but social media has provided a new platform for such congregations to thrive.

To speak of Instagram in an analytical way is to adopt a language incongruent with the ostensible vapidity of the platform. People who have a follower count above a certain threshold are *content creators*. Liking and commenting is *engagement*. There's the *algorithm* and *ratios* and *monetization*. And then there's *community*. Communities form as certain hashtags gain popularity; when a someone tags a photo, it enters the pool of others tagged the same way. In late 2017, Instagram launched a feature where users can follow hashtags in addition to accounts, so people can specify the exact content they desire.

On a recent weekend in May, the College Nutritionist posted a photo of a lunchbox idea: apple slices, baby carrots, cucumber, a few rectangles of cheese, and a single-serving container of

peanut butter. The hashtags at the bottom of the caption give a sense of where the post situates itself in the vast universe of online images:

> #collegenutritionist #BestBodyBabes #1starchPerDay #schooldays #weightlosshelp #weightlossresults #weightlossplan #healthyswap #healthyeating #healthyfoodideas #gogreek #collegefood #collegecooking #collegefoodie #bbgprogress #bbgstronger #bbgnutrition #tiunutritionplan #tiutransformation #tiunutrition #lowcarbrecipes #lowcarblove #lowcarbeating #lowcarbfoods #cincodemayoparty #cincodemayoweekend #peanutsuperfood

To the uninitiated, these hashtags are a mindless jumble of acronyms. But to many others, they represent communities of millions. I wonder if perhaps community isn't the right word—these people don't know each other, only interact online through double-taps and heart-eye emojis—but never mind. In Instagram-speak, these are veritable nations.

BBG, for example, stands for Bikini Body Guide. Bikini Body Guide is a workout guide and eating plan designed by Australian fitness influencer Kayla Itsines, who has 11.4 million followers on Instagram. (A "bikini body" works in the same way that a "best body" does, in that those who coin the word will claim it does not mean what it really means.) TIU, on the other hand, stands for Tone It Up, another media empire founded by two women who, even if they were not technically born in California, are absolutely from California. Tone It Up's website describes the brand as "a community of strong women who support and motivate you to lead your healthiest, happiest lives and make your dreams come true." A tour through the Bikini Body Guide and Tone It Up Instagram accounts, as well as the related hashtags, shows a slew of fitness, nutrition, lifestyle, and transformation photos.

A transformation photo is a funny little thing. A direct comparison of "the thing I was but didn't want to be" versus "the thing I am now, which is better, which is why I'm sharing it with you." The photo on the left is dull and frumpy. The right is spandexed, posed, blessed with a smile and a halo of natural light. And, obviously, thinner.

A natural consequence of seeing a transformation photo is that most people will recognize themselves in the "before" photo, the dull one. The bad one. But that is exactly the point—and the reason that fitness and nutrition brands like BBG and TIU will continue to post them.

But there's problematic, and then there's outright harmful. Communities of those with anorexia, bulimia, and other disordered behaviors create communities on Instagram to encourage others with the same disease to remain steadfast and resist recovery. Instagram has tried to disband these communities, which are called pro-ana for anorexia and pro-mia for bulimia. The Community Guidelines set forth by the corporate team at Instagram assure that the platform is aware of and concerned about disordered content:

> *Maintain our supportive environment by not glorifying self-injury.*
>
> *The Instagram community cares for each other, and is often a place where people facing difficult issues such as eating disorders, cutting, or other kinds of self-injury come together to create awareness or find support. Encouraging or urging people to embrace self-injury is counter to this environment of support, and we'll remove it or disable accounts if it's reported to us. We may also remove content identifying victims or survivors of self-injury if the content targets them for attack or humor.*

The hashtag #anorexia has 5.7 million posts on Instagram. If you click on the hashtag, you'll get a message that the content you're looking for is potentially harmful, do you want to continue? Only the truly determined, apparently, will click once more to see the posts.

I'm afraid to click, but of course I do, for the sake of research and morbid curiosity. It's mostly pictures of sandwiches and milkshakes and quotes on floral backgrounds. These are posts from people in eating disorder recovery. Status updates as they regain the stomach for high calorie foods. But the further I scroll, I see more of what I had initially expected: More collarbones, more

thigh gaps. More… Winona Ryder? I pause. It's a frame from the movie *Girl, Interrupted*. I read the book in high school. "I didn't try to kill myself," Winona is saying. "I tried to make the shit stop." The photo is tagged #depression #anorexia #suicidal #selfharm #sad #eatingdisorder.

Regardless, I thought this would be worse than it is. But I also know that things get more creative. A study at the Georgia Institute of Technology found that users circumvent regulation through purposeful misspellings, or "orthographic variation," in their hashtags. Posts are tagged #anarexia and #anarexyia to bypass Instagram's rules. Members of the community understand the misspellings, even relish in them, because knowing and understanding the rules of the group means that you are truly a part of it, that you deserve to belong inside of this community.

Before people with eating disorders had Instagram, they had online forums: The site myproana.com has hundreds of thousands of users. Before the Internet, it's hard to be sure, but the disease still existed. One of the first widely known eating disorder cases emerged in the 1970s. Karen Carpenter, the velvet contralto voice of the brother-sister duo The Carpenters, died at age thirty-two because of heart failure brought on by anorexia nervosa.

The general perception, brought on by decades of media conditioning, is that those who suffer from eating disorders are always young women. That assumption is misguided—people of all ages, genders, races, and socioeconomic backgrounds are prone—but the numbers do skew towards young women.

Maybe that's why I'm sensitive to this subject, because *I* am the audience, and I spend all my time with the audience, and I see the detriment it causes, not just when young women are whispered about or worried about or fainting or hospitalized, but when they use their intellect and satisfy their curiosity to count grams of fat and research ways to make themselves smaller.

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In the everyday lives of many young women, there exists a series of rituals and practices that are seemingly harmless, apparently healthy, and wonderfully photographable. Social media capitalizes on these tendencies and places them under the guise of promoting health and happiness.

I ask Colleen what her thoughts are on "wellness" and "clean eating." She sighs when I mention the terms. "My view is that they are just euphemisms for diet. They're really sneaky forms of dieting. Back in the 70s, 80s and 90s—we had these diets that were clearly diets, like the grapefruit fast. That's still around, but those were the popular, faddish diets that were clearly targeted towards weight loss. But we're at this really interesting point in history where there's a growing backlash against intentional weight loss and demonizing fat. And the diet industry and food industry has had to adapt accordingly and market their diet as not diets, but as taking care of yourself and lifestyle changes and things like that."

Yet the undercurrent of weight loss is still the same, decades later. "If you really break it down and unpack it, it's really about 'being thin is healthy' and 'health is a moral imperative,'" Colleen says. "It's been shoved down our throats for the past few decades that the only way to happiness and health is restricting your food and controlling your weight and weight suppressing."

Last year, during National Eating Disorder Awareness Week, *Vice* published an article titled "Pro-Eating Disorder Communities Thrive on Instagram." The author, Aurora Stewart de Peña, articulated a concept similar to Colleen's point. "Weight loss is the secret overlord of wellness communities everywhere," she wrote. "The "Why Raw Vegan" (Or "Why Paleo," or "Why Keto" or "Why 30 Bananas a Day") segment of any wellness blog will list many reasons to be like them; you'll have more energy, your skin will be clearer, and your depression will finally subside. But the community forums tell a more focused story: Eat like this, and you'll lose weight."

Jenny mentions how the diet industry preys on fear: People make restrictive choices out of a genuine attempt to improve their health—whatever that may mean—grasping to control the uncontrollable. "People are often under the impression that these things are going to cure certain physical conditions or that they're going to significantly increase someone's lifespan and improve their health," Jenny says. "But we don't have as much control over the minutiae of our body as we think we do. And the actual obsession around it and attempts to micromanage it—the stress that that induces—is just as harmful as anything we think we're curing. So it's sort of a marketing thing that preys on people's fear of mortality and our cultural obsession with health. It's really, it's really dangerous."

The language of diet culture goes beyond just vague terms like "wellness" and "clean eating." Colleen's account reexamines everyday vocabulary and the problematic subtleties attached to certain words. Take "sinful"—as though a brownie could be damning. Or take "flattering," for example: "I dare anyone to come up with an instance where they use the word flattering and it doesn't ultimately circle back to, 'Oh, it makes you look thinner,'" Colleen says. "I don't use it. I'm strongly against it. I think it's a word that means thinner and or slimming or whatever. And I don't want to be adding to that discourse, that this is what you should be striving for above all else."

According to Colleen, all of this can be boiled down and concentrated into a low-calorie TL;DR bone-broth: "If it smells like a diet, and it acts like a diet, it's probably a diet."

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The day after I subscribe to the College Nutritionist's email list, I get an email with a free one-week meal plan. The next day I get Nutrition Basics, and then "Real Talk: Success Strategies," and then "How Lisa lost 55 pounds and Briana fixed her relationship with food."

The last one includes testimonials from past clients. The email begins, first-person from Rachel's perspective, *I wanted to tell share with you some success stories of young women who have followed my system! Listening to your body's hunger & fullness cues, having an abundance of self love, AND having a body that you're proud to show off are all possible.* One testimonial, from someone named Briana, reads, *The lessons I have learned from her are ones I know I can stick to for the rest of my life.* Another woman says she is *eternally grateful*; another *can't wait to see how the rest of my journey goes.*

I think about the rest of my life, not in terms of goals and career and family and self-actualization, but in terms of dieting. They say you should diet at New Years, before summer, after you gain the freshman fifteen, before your wedding, after having kids. Little holidays count too: the College Nutritionist can show you how to make a game-day plate or Sunday brunch so you can "stay on track." By my estimate, that leaves just a few pockets of time where I suppose you're allowed to maintain your weight rather than actively try to reduce it.

I remember being in middle school and a friend's mom told the two of us, wide-eyed and hairy-legged, sitting at the kitchen counter, that once you started shaving your legs, your hair would grow back coarser and thicker, and that after the first time, you would have to shave your legs forevermore.

It's a cycle here, too, in the world of dieting: This is your life now. You will strive to be thin until you die, and even if you reach that slippery handhold, you will still devote lots of time to making sure you never lose grip of it ever again. You will always eat cauliflower rice, and if not, you will at least measure out the proper portion of real rice, and if not, you will become fat, and a failure, and the world will pummel you with dieting tips until you commit to reducing yourself all over again.

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Back in the coffee shop, I ask Jenny if social media has changed the frequency or manifestation of disorders. "Absolutely, yes," she tells me. "We didn't learn about any of this in school, but anecdotally and just through my own experience, it's become very clear. One of the first things I usually do with clients is talk about a social media cleanse, which is the only type of cleanse that I'll endorse. That means like anything that's "fitspo" or "thinspo" or anyone that's like talking about clean eating." ("Fitspo" means fitness inspiration; "Thinspo" means thin inspiration—using images of slim women to motivate one's own weight loss.)

Instead, Jenny advises her clients to alter their media environment by curating their feed with images that challenge ingrained thought patterns. "To start, follow body positive accounts, but also just really diversify the bodies and the people in your feed," she says. "Because you can really change the neural pathways by what you're flooding yourself with, the images you are flooding yourself with. Just by starting to see a broader range of bodies and a range of ethnicities, races, body sizes, body types. It can really just shift what you see as beautiful and acceptable and in turn can start to help people start to gain more acceptance around their own body."

Colleen tells me something similar. Social media is saturated with lots of harmful content, but someone's personal feed doesn't have to be. "You can definitely tailor your social media to be very life-changing," she says. "Honestly, it's one of the biggest tools that I have people use when we're working on beauty ideals and body image and unlearning all of those lessons that we've learned since they were, like, zero—about how thinness is the only way to be beautiful. The research is there. It proves that exposure to those types of bodies and people celebrating their bodies, over and over, constant exposure throughout the day is what's going to help people unlearn the other body ideals."

We're all exposed to so much media, more than any generation before. Colleen wants people to tailor that phenomenon to work for the individual. Instagram, for all its faults, contains a plentitude of accounts focused on eating disorder recovery and body acceptance and positivity. There are countless niches within the umbrella. One such example is Health at Every Size, a concept developed by Linda Bacon in *Health at Every Size: The Surprising Truth About Your Weight*, which counters popular paradigms about obesity and asserts that well-being and healthy habits are more important than any number on the scale. Another is intuitive eating.

"It's another health promoting behavior that is very anti diet, anti-intentional weight loss," Jenny explains to me. "It's a structured framework for learning to really listen to your body and give it what it needs, which sometimes like we need pleasure and comfort. And that might be the chocolate cake or the macaroni and cheese. So it's, um, and the more we avoid those things, you know, the kind of bigger they become in our mind and we just like want them at some point anyway."

It's here, I think, where the crux of the matter lies. The essence, beyond the different opinions on calorie counting or fat acceptance or whatever else, which distinguishes the College Nutritionist and those like her from Jenny and Colleen and those like them. It's the answer to the question, what needs to change?

The College Nutritionist's promise: Lose weight—change yourself—and you'll good enough, and you'll be happy.

Jenny: Change what you see, change what you surround yourself with, and with that mindset you can work toward self-acceptance.

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Perhaps the most salient way that body and food and eating disorders colonize Instagram is how they communicate significance and value via visual image. We see, we perceive, and we

extrapolate. If you post a picture of your body on Instagram, it's still your body, but it's also something else, something detached from you, something to be judged. A tidy photograph of avocado toast or a macrobiotic salad or a matcha latte is no longer a source of caloric energy or gastronomic pleasure, but a measure of something else—our health? our commitment self-care? our worth? And in all of this, we've cut off the thing from the sensory experience it is meant to transmit.

But social media won't change, or at least it won't change quickly enough. We can unfollow accounts on Instagram and populate our feeds with new bodies and new mindsets. But at the end of the day, it's a political act to refuse to conform to the standard, and the world will resist.

Colleen puts it bluntly. "When you're recovering from an eating disorder, the world is triggering. That's just the way of it. And anyone who's been to inpatient treatment knows this, because it's a very protective, safe, almost bubble-esque environment. And then when you leave you just feel like there are all these triggers are coming at you from every direction. There's always going to be things that are triggering no matter where you go and social media is no different."

Everywhere, food choice is a measure of virtue. The worship of certain bodies verges on religious. Thinness is a moral imperative. And resisting these societal paradigms—the infiltration of everyday speech, the bombardment of advertisements, the gravitational pull of the diet industry—is a daily practice that requires as much time and diligence as dieting itself.