

The following interview took place on February 15, 2005 at the home of Mary Pipher, acclaimed author and psychologist, in Lincoln, Nebraska.



*Dr. Pipher, author of *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (1994) and *Hunger Pains* (1995), answered questions about the role culture plays in the current “epidemic” of obesity, fat prejudice, and strategies for creating a wellness plan within the family, school and community.*

NANCY FINKEN [Interviewer]

Obesity rates in the United States have been on the rise since the 1980’s. At about that same time, you started to notice that your counseling office was filling with clients with eating disorders. You wrote a book in the mid-90’s (that was later updated) entitled *Hunger Pains* in which you discuss anorexia, bulimia, why diets don’t work, women’s attitudes about weight and exercise, and society’s attitudes about beauty...as well as provide some great, practical advice for healthy eating. As obesity rates climb in the United States and as more people are alarmed by the number of children who are truly overweight, how do we reach the children and families of kids who are eating too much while acknowledging there are people with problems on the other side of the scale as well?

MARY PIPHER

Well, I’m both a psychologist and anthropologist. And I like to always frame an issue in “the big picture,” which is human history. And if you think about it, we adapted as human beings to enjoy fat and sugar because we needed it to stay alive. And even if you think of more recent times – in Nebraska a hundred years ago, for instance – most people were doing hard physical work every day. The kind of meals a farm family served at breakfast – bacon, eggs, potatoes, pancakes, pie (that was a big staple in my family) – made perfect sense. People were going to go out in the snow to feed cattle... Now we’re in a world where people are getting very little exercise. Schools are cutting back (on P.E). Parents are driving their children to school as opposed to having them bike and walk. And everywhere we go, there’s food in this country.

You know, eating disorders and obesity are really two sides of the same coin. There are two ways people respond to really toxic cultural messages about food.

Ellen Goodman wrote a column called “The Boulevard of Broken Diets,” in which she recounted trying to cut back on high-fat unhealthy foods. Every single building on the way to her office was a ice cream store, a cookie store, a donut store... It’s almost like you’re force-feeding a population like we force-feed geese for foie gras, and yet at the same time

we're telling people that they are too heavy. We put our whole citizenry in a real cultural bind today.

NANCY FINKEN

Can you talk about the role popular culture plays in the current "epidemic" of obesity? Talk about the contradictory messages with which children are inundated on a daily basis...

MARY PIPHER

You know, not having a healthy diet is now two or three generations deep in this culture. Advertising is a big part of this. The diets in schools aren't healthy. We're feeding our children high fat, unhealthy food. There are schools that don't have any milk in their vending machines. If a child actually wants to get some fruit in school, it would be very difficult. We need a lot of new public policies.

NANCY FINKEN

Does it take government regulation to make that happen? Does it take a demanding informed citizen? Does it take responsible business owners to make these changes?

MARY PIPHER

All of those things. Families need to do their best to help children learn adequate information about food, serve good healthy food, and say No to other people who are all too eager to offer children too many sweets, too much candy. So families have a job to do. We all have our own personal work to do with ourselves because one of the things American culture is not teaching any of us right now is restraint.

If you think about the great religions of the world, they all teach denying yourself. Delay frustration. It's not healthy for you to try to meet every need you possibly have. Think about other people. Tolerate frustration. Advertising says "you're entitled to have whatever thing you want right this minute." Advertising creates habits. And one kind of addict is a food addict. The perfect consumer is a food addict. And food addiction in this country leads to terrible consequences.

Families need to make very good careful decisions about how they relate to the private culture or they're going to end up rushed, unhealthy, addicted, stressed, and broke. So it isn't just food, it's other areas as well.

NANCY FINKEN

How do you think that a family should begin to analyze what food means in their lives?

MARY PIPHER

I think the best way for a family to conceptualize this is in terms of wellness, fitness, and health. Families need a holistic program. Mom and dad should do what they ask the children to do: Help with the meals. Eat together. Prepare foods together (so the children can learn to cook). Exercise together.

It's a lot of daily little decisions. The first thing is a commitment on the part of the parents to good nutrition, adequate exercise, and stress management. Every American, by the way, needs good stress management training because we so often misuse food as a way of dealing with stress.

Schools also have a responsibility. Schools need to serve healthy meals to children and somehow find the time to teach children how to eat properly.

Business owners need to take responsibility. There's food everywhere now. Not just in grocery stores. There's food in drug stores. There's food in gas stations. And almost all of it is bad.

We need public policy changes. No advertising to children under 15! We need much better labeling because you really can't even figure out whether or not certain products are healthy. They're so cleverly disguised. We need labeling around good content. We need serving size regulations in this country.

NANCY FINKEN

Since the time that we were born, food is provided as comfort. How can food, which gives so much pleasure, create illnesses and life-threatening diseases?

MARY PIPHER

Because there's much more external temptation, as well as internal cues that trigger eating, such as despair, loneliness, depression, frustration, stress. People eat to sleep. A lot of people can't go to sleep unless they have some sugar, or a cookie or two, to help them go to sleep at night.

How do you deal with those internal feelings? Well it's fine every now and then to treat yourself by buying a chocolate bar. Or it's fine every now and then when you get together with friends to show your love by having some rich food. You don't need to change your customs entirely. But you do need to have a healthy lifestyle plan that has a sustainable nutritional plan that will keep you fit and healthy for your entire life. Something besides coming home from work, lonely and depressed, and sitting down with a carton of Ben and Jerry's ice cream. We need to ask "What else could I do that might make me feel better?"

NANCY FINKEN

Does the “lifestyle plan” work with kids? How do we help kids who are eating to comfort themselves, or because they had a bad day at school, or they’re upset about something? Can we start talking to kids about that? Or is what you’re suggesting more of an adult sort of analysis?

MARY PIPHER

I think this business of using food as comfort or using food to quell unpleasant inner states probably starts almost at birth. When I was doing counseling, I’d encourage young mothers to not give their babies milk when they’re unhappy. Make sure you only feed babies when they’re hungry. If they’re crying because they want picked up, or if they’re crying because they’re bored, then try to do something else besides feed them. Because those associations come very early: When you’re bored, you have milk. When you’re unhappy, you have milk. And so on.

We live in a culture of temptation. It’s like all of America has become a casino in a certain way. And the only way we can survive living in a casino is by having a great deal of inner control. And there’s a good phrase for it now, kind of a catch phrase – emotional intelligence – that really has to do with knowing who we are as people and having the ability to make wise choices about what’s in our best interests. Children desperately need this training from their parents. And again, it’s hard for parents who haven’t been trained in self-control themselves to train their children.

NANCY FINKEN

What about fat prejudice and its effect on obese people? Does discrimination against heavy people contribute to a defeatist attitude?

MARY PIPHER

Well fat prejudice is terrible in this country. Children as young as three and four rate their chubby peers much more negatively. Prejudice starts at a very young age. Heavy people are also less likely to get a job, get a scholarship, or be nominated for honors in high school regardless of their grades. They’re less likely to be found innocent by a jury. They’re less likely to get help if their car is parked along the road. I mean there’s a lot of genuine social stigma against people who are overweight. And all of that stigma is internalized. People who are overweight have more trouble with depression.

We know on so many levels how difficult it is for obese people in this culture, both interpersonally and in terms of their health, and yet even as we know it, we are essentially force-feeding children diets and information that will only contribute to them becoming obese adults. We’ve really set up a sort of a perfect storm of issues around food, weight, diet, health, and exercise for our children and for our adults.

NANCY FINKEN

You're looking at things more globally as a culture. We all share responsibility for our neighbor's successes and failures, and yet increasingly we hear people saying, "it's your problem, fix it. You know to be overweight is unhealthy, yet you choose to buy the Twinkie at the store instead of a banana."

MARY PIPHER

First of all, personal responsibility shouldn't apply to children. Three-year-olds aren't really in a very good position to be accused of not being personally responsible for wanting candy at a store. Children who eat a school lunch program that's unhealthy really can't be accused of making bad decisions in terms of personal responsibility. But the other thing about personal responsibility is it occurs in a context. And we have set up our citizens – in the most impossible of all contexts – to be personally responsible. And when they have trouble, we accuse them of being irresponsible. So I think it's unfair to people. That's one thing.

The other thing is "personal responsibility" right now is a very political term. And the flip side of personal responsibility means you have no responsibility to other people, it means you have no communal responsibility for each other, it means the government has no responsibility to make sure that we're well taken care of in terms of healthy diets and good information as consumers and protection of childhood.

So I think that our government, our public policies, our advertising industry, even the way marketing is done in grocery stores, all bear a share of the blame for what's happening now, as well as, of course, the cutbacks in school budgets that eliminate physical education programs.

NANCY FINKEN

How do we talk to our young children about healthy weights without insinuating that they're fat, or in negative terms that could hurt their self-esteem?

MARY PIPHER

Well first of all, I would go back to that business of the wellness, or lifestyle, program. Talk won't do it. The family has to have an exercise plan. There has to be good healthy food in the house, and no snacking on anything but healthy food. I'd talk about it terms of fitness. Tell your child, "We want you healthy and fit." Not so much because of things like heart disease and diabetes – what ten-year-old cares about that? But rather in terms of "if you want to play sports, if you want to dance, if you want to be a cheerleader, these things require you to be fit." So fitness is a

possibility as long as it's not tied into things that no eleven-year-old can imagine wanting or caring about. Essential hypertension isn't a big sell to a ten-year-old. On the other hand, being a cheerleader or being an athlete or something like that might be.

The other thing is no matter what age a child is, if they're chubby, they know they're chubby. And they're already being teased about it in far crueler ways than any parent would do. So another way to handle it is to wait until you sense that your child is really feeling gloomy and sad, that they've been picked on, or they say something, or you hear someone say something to them... That's a good time, because they're feeling bad and you can offer them help.

Once you've got it figured out, you're "in" for the rest of your life. There's a certain set of skills you have to have around shopping, around how you eat, around self-control, around wellness. And once you have them, you're okay for the rest of your life. You've got a system down that will work.

NANCY FINKEN

And that affects change in generations to come.

MARY PIPHER

That's right. Good point.