Many people have become increasingly interested in issues relating to one’s health in the past several years. Many restaurants have changed ingredients to promote a healthier population, while other people turn to fitness and dieting to live healthier lifestyles. What happens when this dieting goes too far? Though much focus is placed on decreasing the problem of obesity, not much attention is paid to another very important issue known as eating disorders. Anorexia and Bulimia are very serious and dangerous issues that many Americans across the country deal with each day. Many people believe that the sole cause of the increase in eating disorders is a result of the constant portrayal of the “thin” image in the media. They feel that these images are what makes one want to change the way they are because they feel this “thin” image is what is socially acceptable. If one does not look like the models in advertisements, or some of the biggest celebrities, they feel like they won’t be accepted and must change to fit in. Some people believe that action should be taken and that the media should get rid of the constant portrayal of the “thin” image. Others believe that the media does not have as much of an impact as many people believe and therefore, nothing needs to be done to change the image that is being portrayed. Though the media does play a substantial role in causing eating disorders, it is not the only cause; therefore, it is not fully to blame and the portrayal of the “thin” image need not be changed.

Eating disorders are extremely dangerous disorders that do much harm to one’s body. Anorexia Nervosa is a disorder that occurs when a person refuses to eat and loses
around 85 percent of his or her expected body weight (Polivy and Herman 188). Most of the time, those who suffer have an extreme fear of being overweight. Bulimia Nervosa is another eating disorder in which a person diets then follows it up by binge eating. Once he or she finishes binge eating, that person either vomits, exercises or uses laxatives to rid his or her body of the food that they have consumed to avoid weight gain (ANRED- “Definitions: The Better- Known Eating Disorders” n. pag.).

Similar to those with Anorexia, many people who suffer from Bulimia fear gaining weight. Most people suffering from these disorders are teenage girls and young women. Men can also develop these disorders, but it less likely to occur than it is in females (Adams 71). Statistically, females are more than 10 times more likely than males to develop eating disorders (Polivy and Herman 192). Both of these disorders can be deadly. It is more likely to result in death if one does not seek the proper treatment. Other complications that result from these dangerous disorders include cardiac arrest, kidney damage, liver damage, loss of bone mass, weakened immune system, depression and much more (ANRED- “Medical and Psychological Complications of Eating Disorders” n. pag.). Anorexia and Bulimia affect one’s entire body and without treatment, one may suffer tremendously.

About one in 100 females aging from 10 years old to 20 suffer from Anorexia and about four out of every one hundred people suffer from Bulimia. Since many people suffering from Bulimia are secretive about having this disorder, this number may actually be higher. There is also 50 percent chance that those with Anorexia may develop Bulimia (ANRED- “Statistics” n. pag.). These eating disorders are a growing problem in the United States and it is important for one to recognize the causes.
There are various causes that lead to someone becoming Anorexic or Bulimic. One cause that many believe is solely responsible for causing eating disorders is the media. In advertisements, on television, and in movies, the portrayal of the “perfect” body is more prominent than ever. However, the media is only a fraction of the issue. Within the world of the mass media, “shape and body weight define perfection. Women perceive themselves as being bigger than they actually are. Their figure deviates from the ideal thus resulting in self body dissatisfaction” (Almond 367). Yes, this can lead a person to be unhappy about their self image, but the media is not working alone. These images can lead to a person not being happy with their body, but it does not necessarily lead to them developing an eating disorder because of it.

According to a study done in 2002, “32% of female TV network characters are underweight, while only 5% of females in the U.S. audience are underweight” (ANRED-“What Causes Eating Disorders?”). If 32 percent of the characters are underweight, that means that the actors playing them are underweight. What this means is that the media is taking a bigger toll on those who are in the media rather than those watching it. Those placed in front of the camera are the ones who are constantly watched and focused on. Their weight is something that is looked at all the time and there are more pressures on them than the average person (ANRED- “What Causes Eating Disorders?” n. pag.). The truth is that if the media was the major leading cause of eating disorders, many more people would be suffering. Lynn Grefe, the chief executive for the National Eating Disorders Association, believes that if the media does have as much of an impact as some believe, then “every one of us who reads a fashion magazine would have one” (Taber n. pag.). Every person in the United States is constantly surrounded by these images every
day of one’s life. Whether it is images seen on television or what is seen on billboards that line the streets, the media surrounds everyone. If these images are so powerful that they can cause eating disorders, every single person in the country would be either Anorexic or Bulimic.

Bradley Bayou, a clothing designer, was interviewed by People magazine with his daughter, Alexis, who suffered from an eating disorder. According to Alexis, she began feeling self-conscious about her weight upon entering college. She wanted to look like all the other girls (89-90). Alexis also stated, “I was very embarrassed that I couldn't fit into any of the designer samples sent to my dad. I thought if only I could fit into the same clothes those models do, I would be beautiful; I saw myself much heavier than I really was” (89-90). Her father worked in the industry, and because she was constantly exposed to that industry, it had affected her in a negative way. Alexis was more affected by that than the average person because the average person may not have the same connection to the industry. The media can impact a person tremendously, but it is more influential to those who are closely linked to it.

If the media did change its portrayal, it still would not solve the issue of eating disorders. It simply would not be enough. There are so many other major factors that play into it that if it were changed, that it would not have much of an impact. Harvard Medical School began a study in 1998 in which they studied the effects of television on teenagers in the island of Fiji. The study began when the people of Fiji were first introduced to television. The outlook on their body image had changed dramatically from seeing a heavier body as normal, to seeing a thinner body as more beautiful. According to the study, “15% of girls, aged seventeen on average, reported that they had vomited to
control weight.” In this case, the media did have a vast impact, but those in Fiji are not surrounded by the media as much as those in the United States. People who live in the United States are exposed to the media every day of their lives. When this study was done in Fiji, television had just been introduced a few years earlier. Those in Fiji are not as used to it as those in the United States are; hence it has a much bigger impact on those living in Fiji (“Sharp Rise in Eating Disorders in Fiji Follows Arrival of TV” n. pag.).

Some very important causes are social and biological influences. Family plays a major role in causing eating disorders. A study was conducted in which several females were interviewed and asked open-ended questions about what they thought caused their eating disorders. One of the most common causes mentioned was dysfunctional families (Tozzi et al. 49-150). Family can have one of the biggest impacts on one’s life. According to Christine Gerbstadt, the spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association, “children learn attitudes about dieting and their bodies through observation. When mom is dissatisfied with her body and frequently diets, daughters will learn to base their self-worth on their appearance” (ANRED- “What Causes Eating Disorders?” n. pag.). If one is not the weight that is seen as an ideal weight by a parent, it may push one to starve their body of food, which could result in the formation of a dangerous eating disorder. If parents constantly emphasize the importance of dieting and constantly focus on foods, it is more likely that a child may pick up similar habits, which may become unhealthy (Polivy and Herman 194). Family has a tremendous impact. The way a child is brought up influences their thoughts. In one study, “Canadian children in grades 3 and 4 said they would rather lose a parent, get cancer, or live through nuclear war than be fat” (Graves 21). This is disturbing for the fact that these children place so much importance
on weight. Parents are sending the wrong message to their children. Fixing the media will not fix this problem. It is so much deeper than that. One must fix the family before fixing the media.

Alison Field, the author of a Harvard study, agrees with Gerbstadt. Field says, “even small cues- such as making self- deprecating remarks about bulging thighs or squealing in delight over a few lost pounds- can send the message that thinness is to be prized above all else” (ANRED- “What Causes Eating Disorders?” n. pag.). The smallest comments are enough to drive one to develop an eating disorder. Teasing a person by making comments like, “you look fat in those jeans” or “look at that flab,” can inflict major damage to one’s self-esteem and push them to take drastic measures (Deardorff n. pag.).

Kasey Halpin discusses her battle with Bulimia in her personal narrative, “Ideal Me.” In this Halpin recounts all of the times in which she was faced with negative comments from loved ones which ultimately led to her developing Bulimia. She began by dieting which grew and grew to the point in which she began this binge-purge disorder. Her grandmother and her aunt would always discuss how laxatives would help them maintain their weight. It was from them that she learned another way for her to not gain weight. Some of her closest friends and family were so absorbed with being thin that she suffered from a disorder because of it (129-139).

If parents are overly controlling or if they are abusive, one is more likely to develop either Anorexia or Bulimia. Child abuse can be linked to the development of such disorders (Hernandez n. pag.). One study concluded that, “ of 670 female college students screened for childhood abuse, 29 sexually abused, 32 physically abused, and 29
non-abused women completed measures of eating disorder symptoms, psychological factors thought to be related to eating disorders, and body image distortion” (Schaaf and McCanne n. pag.). Abuse can affect a person in a negative way, and some of those who have been abused turn to either Anorexia or Bulimia to make them feel better about themselves. According to Vandereycken and Hartley, to those who were raped or abused, the disorder may “be viewed as a scar of a ‘violated’ body” (72).

Just like the influence of family, the influence of peers is extremely important when discussing causes. Comments made by those close to a person can hold a lot of weight. The comments they make and their values can influence how one feels about their own body weight. When family and friends praise someone for losing weight, it can lead to the development of an eating disorder. It makes one feel as if losing weight is something positive and that they will get more praise for doing so. Even the lack of friends can lead to the development of an eating disorder (Polivy and Herman 193). Some may feel that if they lost weight, they would fit in more.

Western culture also places much importance on the image of the thin female. Males are not as pressured by society to be thin as females are. In the western culture, thinness often represents beauty and success (Vandereycken and Hartley 71). Society in general, including families and all other people, is a major factor and should hold much of the blame. Changing the media would not change the mindset of all the people who believe this all over the country. One’s own family and friends are extremely influential, and the media will not change how one interprets the views of those they are closest with. The media is simply portraying the image that is seen as beauty, but maximizing it to a much larger scale.
Predisposed factors, traits and genetics are also a leading cause. The need for control is especially important. In a study of those with eating disorders, many diagnosed with these disorders were perfectionists and felt like they needed to be in control of every aspect of their life (Polivy and Herman 198). Most are highly ambitious and feel like they have to excel in all they do. They need to be successful. They need to be powerful. They need to have the “perfect” body. Unfortunately, these traits can become dangerous when a person goes too far. Some of the other causes lie within those who are emotionally unstable, fear conflict or are depressed (Thompson-Brenner et al. n. pag.). Many suffering from these disorders also have self-esteem issues. They often times turn to the disorder to make them feel better about themselves. They feel as if they cannot do anything correctly and have no self-worth. They feel that being thin is the only way they can possess some value (Graves 21). Trey, a fourteen year old bulimic male had a fear of conflict. To avoid conflict, he would binge eat and later purge all that he had previously consumed to make himself feel better (Graves 21). Some research now suggests:

“that genetic factors predispose some people to Anorexia, perfectionism, and obsessive- compulsive thoughts and behaviors. These people seem to have more than their share of eating disorders. In fact, with a mother or sister who has had Anorexia Nervosa are 12 times more likely than others with no family history of that disorder to develop it themselves. They are four times more likely to develop Bulimia” (ANRED- “What Causes Eating Disorders?” n. pag.).
Children with parents who suffer from either Anorexia or Bulimia are more likely to develop the same disorder. Some of the traits belonging to that parent may be passed on to the child (Graves 21).

There now is evidence that Anorexia may be linked to a portion of one’s brain as well. A case was reported in which a female with Anorexia had a seizure. The doctors working with this patient discovered a cavernoma which was found on the front portion of the right Sylvain in her brain. The patient underwent a surgical procedure and had it removed. Once it was removed, the patient’s eating disorder had disappeared. She no longer starved herself and recovered fully (Houy et al. n. pag.). A change in the media would not do much if someone is genetically predisposed to have an eating disorder. It lies in the traits that they are born with, and the images the media portrays will do nothing to fix that.

Having other psychological disorders can also lead to the development of an eating disorder. “Nearly 40% of people with Bulimia have Borderline Personality Disorder” says Graves (21). Those with Borderline Personality Disorder suffer from extreme mood swings in which they can be extremely happy one minute and extremely angry the next. They often have low self-esteem and crave attention. Their needs and their fears may cause them to use food in the wrong way (Graves 21).

Another prominent disorder in those with either Anorexia or Bulimia is the Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. In both disorders, perfectionism is an extremely prominent trait in the individual. Those who suffer from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder suffer from repetitive thoughts or actions, which can even negatively impact one’s eating habits (Lavender et al. 331-332). Obsessive Compulsive Disorder can trigger a person to
unintentionally develop an eating disorder. It is not something that they have much control over. This is just one of the many variables that cause eating disorders.

Body Dysmorphic Disorder also is quite often related to eating disorders. Body Dysmorphic Disorder is when one sees his or her self completely different than he or she actually is. One with this disorder often feels as if they are a monster and often times it is based on their appearance, especially a defect that they find within themselves. They may feel like they are extremely overweight or extremely ugly. They tend to over exaggerate their looks to an unhealthy level (Bulik, M., and Sullivan 96). If one constantly sees themselves as overweight, they may try to lose the weight that they believe is there, even if it is not. This can be extremely dangerous because those who suffer from this disorder do not know how much weight that they have actually lost and that they have developed an additional disorder which can be fatal. Simply by changing the image that is portrayed in the media will not solve all of the other issues surrounding these eating disorders like these.

There also happens to be a connection between thought-shape fusion and eating disorders. Thought shape-fusion is a cognitive distortion in which a person may think of themselves and the things they are doing differently than they actually are (Shafran, Roz, and Robinson 400). There is also thought-action fusion from which the term thought-shape fusion comes from. This term is “used to describe the belief that (one’s) specific intrusive thoughts can directly influence the relevant external event and/or the belief that having these intrusive thoughts is morally equivalent to carrying out a prohibited action” (Shafran, Roz, and Robinson 400). Thought-shape fusion can be found amongst those with eating disorders. This means that even thinking about “eating a forbidden food
makes it likely that the person has gained weight or changed shape” (Shafran, Roz, and Robinson 400). If one with thought-shape fusion thought about eating such a food, they would feel like that was basically equivalent to actually eating it. When one has thoughts like this, they can develop an eating disorder because they feel like they cannot consume food because they can convince themselves that they do not need to. How can a change in the media change the way someone views themselves or the way that they think?

There are some other very important influences as well. Participation in certain sports and dance can trigger one to develop such dangerous disorders. Many studies suggest “that participants in sports that emphasize appearance and a lean body are at higher risk for developing an eating disorder than are non-athletes or folks involved in sports that require muscle mass and bulk” (ANRED- “Athletes with Eating Disorders” n. pag.). Sports like cheerleading, gymnastics, figure skating, and other activities like ballet, all focus heavily on body weight. It is also a major focus in the male based sport, wrestling, which has been known to be a cause in the development of eating disorders in males. The constant focus on weight can trigger a person to develop these dangerous disorders. They will exercise, change their eating habits, and may go too far because they feel like the thinner they are, the better their performance will be (ANRED- “Athletes with Eating Disorders” n. pag.).

One story was reported in which three young male wrestlers died as a result of extreme weight loss. In all three cases, these young men had tried to drop their weight quickly so that they could compete in the lower weight classes. A coach at Iowa State University stated, “When you have deaths like this, it calls into question what's wrong with the sport. Wrestlers believe that, foremost, it's their responsibility to make weight,
and that mind set may come from the fact that they believe themselves invincible" (ANRED- “Athletes with Eating Disorders” n. pag.). They felt as if nothing can happen to them. These three men pushed themselves farther than their body could take. Sports like this that focus too much on body weight can cause terrible disorders like Anorexia and Bulimia. If a change in the media occurred, it would not stop this problem at all. For some sports, keeping one’s weight down may be mandatory if they want to compete, and what these people see on television or in advertisements will not change their actions.

Medical problems can also turn into eating disorders. Diabetes is a medical problem which places heavy importance on food. Diabetics need to pay close attention to what food they consume. Sometimes, this grows into the development of a very dangerous eating disorder. This goes back to the issue of control. Control is a central issue for those battling diabetes and eating disorders. Prior to the commercial production of supplemental insulin, “starvation was a primary treatment for diabetes” (ANRED- “Diabetes and Eating Disorders” n. pag.). A treatment that subjected one to an eating disorder? Perhaps that is why it is so common that eating disorders are common amongst those with Diabetes. The focus on food could possibly turn into a focus on weight loss. One source revealed that “people who take insulin to control Diabetes can misuse it to lose weight” (ANRED- “Diabetes and Eating Disorders” n. pag.). They could also, “use their Diabetes to hide Anorexia or Bulimia because, after all, they are supposed to be watching what they eat, and they can blame poorly controlled Diabetes for alarming weight loss” (ANRED- “Diabetes and Eating Disorders” n. pag.).

Times of transition can be hard on a person. Sometimes they can be so difficult as to cause someone to develop disorders like Anorexia or Bulimia. “Puberty, starting a new
school, beginning a new job, death, divorce, marriage, family problems, breakup of a relationship, graduation into a chaotic, competitive world,” (ANRED- “What Causes Eating Disorders?”) can trigger a person to develop such dangerous disorders. Sometimes around these times, there is an increased amount of pressure placed on a person in which they may not feel they cannot reach certain expectations, and this can trigger the development of an eating disorder. They may turn to eating disorders as a way to escape this problem.

Eating disorders are extremely dangerous and can be brought on by various different causes. They are disorders that affect several people throughout the country. Changing the image that the media constantly surrounds the people with will not do much. There are too many factors to take into considerations. There does not need to be a change in the media, but a change in our society. A simple comment about weight or a single thought about one’s own image can be enough to drive a person to developing such a dangerous disorder. Polivy and Herman believe that “idealized media images are at best a background cause of eating disorders. Exposure to the media is so widespread that if such exposure were the cause of eating disorders, then it would be difficult to explain why anyone would not be eating disordered” (192). There are far more major causes that should be changed to make an impact. The media is just a small part of the issue and it should not be completely to blame or changed.
Works Cited


