Struggling Body Image

By Eunseo Song

Jordan Pinneke described her eating habits during her freshman year of college as nonexistent.

“I would not eat anything all day,” Pinneke said. “If I did eat something, it would be sample from farmers market and feel guilty I needed to run more that day.”

She obsessively kept track of the calories she ate as a way of coping with stress coming from school and being away from her family for the first time. Her weight dropped from 130 pounds to 88 pounds, equivalent to what she weighed in the fourth grade.

Right before Thanksgiving of her freshman year, Pinneke was hospitalized and diagnosed with anorexia. She was in treatment for her entire second semester.

Eating can easily become a college student’s poor coping technique in response to stress. In fact, the number of University of Minnesota students who reported a diagnosed eating disorder increased between 2013 and 2015. During this time period, the number of men who reported an eating disorder diagnoses increased from 0.4 percent to 1.2 percent. Additionally, the number of women who reported a diagnosed eating disorder also increased from 4.1 percent to 5.8 percent, according to Boynton Health Service.

When students face an eating disorder, they can’t get treatment directly on campus. Instead, Boynton Health Service offers stress management to prevent a problem before it becomes uncontrollable.

Maggie Vertalino, a dietitian at Boynton Health Service, said many factors go into the development of an eating disorder. Vertalino said that stress comes from moving away from home, figuring out how to eat in the dining hall, and relationship or trauma issues. Among these stresses, Vertalino said stress from a mental health problem such as anxiety or depression or mental distortions about body image can eventually lead to an eating disorder.

“It’s usually related to stress or anxiety or depression. So oftentimes, it’s tied more to mental health,” Vertalino said. “And I think we are seeing it as an overall increase in students seeking mental health. So we are becoming more aware of eating disorder behaviors.”

Vertalino said eating becomes a sense of comfort to the students who struggle with stress. “When they feel like there are a lot of things going on that are out of their control, they feel like one thing they can control is their food,” Vertalino said.

Pinneke, who recently graduated from the University of Minnesota, said her eating disorder got out of hand easily. She would set a goal to lose weight, but once she reached it, she wanted to reach another goal. “That’s when my unhealthy obsession of working out kicked in,” she said.

Pinneke said that when she had an eating disorder, she believed being healthy was reaching the lowest weight possible. She said a majority of people she met at the university had an eating disorder tendency even if they did not have an eating disorder. “People would say I had a cookie today, so I have to eat salad for dinner or skip it.”

Senior Hannah Bailey was not an exception. She experienced a drastic weight gain and loss during her freshman and sophomore years from the big changes of coming to college and poor decision making. “I remember feeling very lost. For me, the major thing was the anxiety and stress of being alone,” Bailey said. “I kind of ate to make myself feel better.”

Bailey said her weight decrease occurred due to depression and taking a lot of stimulants, which made her not want to eat. At the time, Bailey said, she did not see it as a problem. “I didn’t even realize as I was getting better that I had a problem until I was looking at photographs of myself a year later.”

David Golden, a director of public health and communications at Boynton Health Service, said a higher level of stress and eating disorders tend to go together, so naturally a good strategy to manage stress results in a healthy diet.

Golden said that Boynton Health Service supports every student with 10 to 12 visits per year. “Supporting students with stress on the prevention side is the best model policy,” Golden said.

He said students with an eating disorder need well-established programs for thorough treatment, so Boynton Health Service refers them to The Emily Program and Melrose Center.

Student Nutrition Advocacy Collaborative, also known as SNAC, is a peer helping group of junior, senior and graduate nutrition students dedicated to increasing nutrition awareness and teaching important nutrition skills. SNAC helps students with grocery store tours, peer nutrition checkups, cooking classes conducted in students’ homes, and nutrition speakers.

“We try to counsel students to have a better relationship with food,” said Rebecca Leighton, a peer educator of SNAC. Leighton is a second year graduate student studying nutrition. She said a lot of times students say how much bad food they eat in one day. However, what students eat throughout a week is important, and there is no good or bad food, she said.

Leighton said eating from all of the food groups is important, so students can have whatever they want in their diet in moderation.

“Sending those messages to students even if they don’t have eating disorders really prevents an eating disorder tendency by just reassuring students that you shouldn’t call food good or bad or restrict yourself to the point of starving,” Leighton said.