

feature

# The Woman disembodied: eating disorders



by Melissa Barrett

Graphic courtesy of The Women's Press

**"B**eauty is only skin deep." For a woman in Western society this is completely opposite to the messages they continuously receive: a thin body is a beautiful body, a thin body is a healthy body.

Once a woman has achieved thinness, she will also achieve a certain level of health, success and, of course, beauty.

It is not very surprising that 90 per cent of Canadian women have some degree of body image dissatisfaction and by age 18, 80 per cent have dieted at least once.

Women overemphasize their body image; they equate it with their self-worth. To be "fat" represents a certain loss of self-control and self-respect. Women come in a variety of shapes and sizes, but less than five per cent of them will ever come close to "fitting" the ideal, (35" 25" 35").

In fact, average weights for women between 17 and 24 have actually increased by five to six lbs. since 1959. This reality, however, is not reflected in the popular media where the ideal body type has decreased in size. Being forced to obtain this unrealistic body size has contributed to the high percentage of eating disorders among this age group.

The body ideal that is presented — thin yet shapely, flexible yet fragile looking — is that of an adolescent. This is a complete denial of the mature woman's body, thus, it is a denial of womanhood itself.

The undeveloped or adolescent body presents an image of powerlessness that is in need of control or domination. Coincidentally, many women who suffer from eating disorders feel that their only means of control is through controlling their weight.

In mass media, the female body has been broken up into its constituent parts, (**disembodied**): breasts, legs, hips, buttocks. It is impossible for a woman to view herself as a whole. She can easily become alienated from her own body.

When women ask each other how they feel, invariably one will hear a statement like, "I feel pretty good except I can't seem to lose any weight off my thighs." It's as if an area of the body can be targeted, forgetting that it is interconnected to the rest of the body.

Women respond to these pressures through dieting and exercise. Advertisements for diet and fitness centres usually feature a woman and the message is clear, "Lose weight and feel great." (Male models are suspiciously absent from most of these ads.)

However, researchers are finding that restricting one's food intake is usually the first step toward an eating disorder.

Dieting causes a constant fluctuation in one's weight which can be very dangerous to the dieter's health.

It's not as unhealthy for a woman to be overweight as it is for a man, simply due to the different weight distribution in a woman's body.

During this week, the National Eating Disorders Awareness Centre is sponsoring an Eating Disorders Awareness Week. The event will bring attention to these issues and how they affect all women, not only those suffering from eating disorders.

The Centre was created in 1985 to meet the substantial demand for information about eating disorders. They have served to provide the general public and the professional community with accurate, up-to-date information on eating disorders.

This is the third year an awareness week has been held, and, according to Clara Rice, coordinator of Awareness Week, response has been growing steadily.

For the past three years under the direction of Page Wescott, the Counselling and Development Centre has run group sessions to deal with eating disorders. The sessions, which ran over a 10-week period, were designed to meet the demand for information on campus.

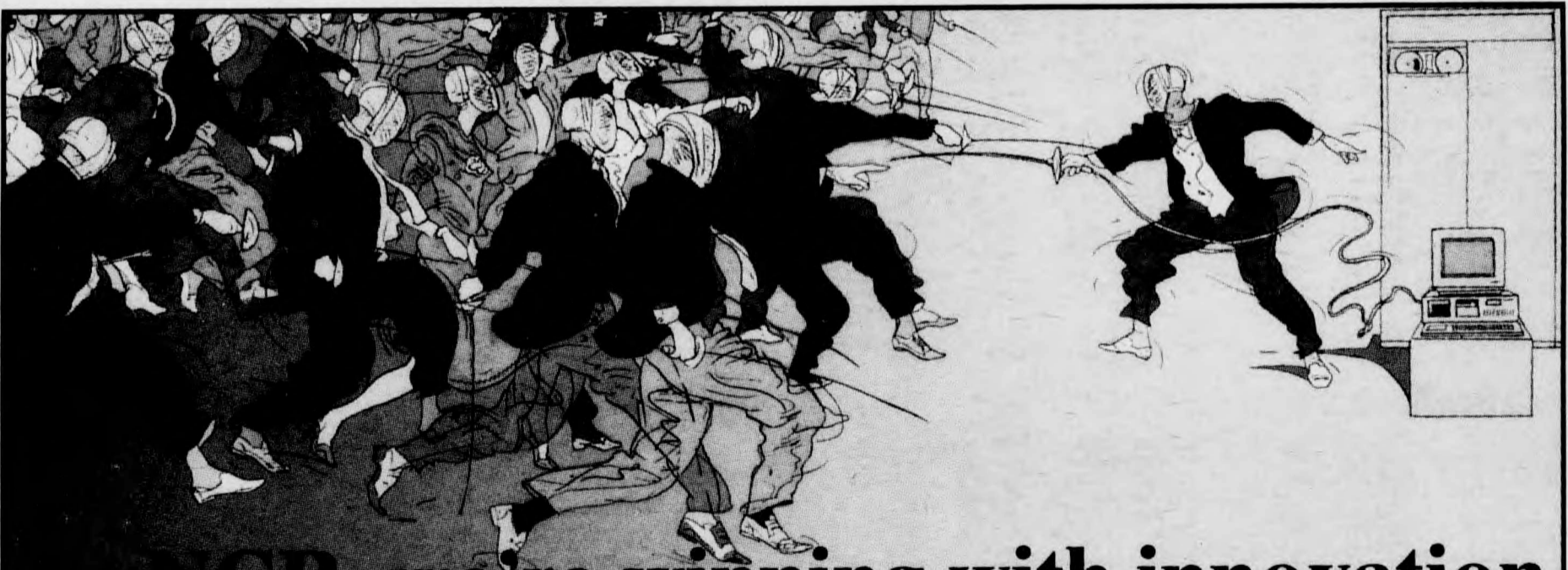
It is unclear whether the Centre will run a session this year. Like other areas of the university, the centre has suffered from some budget restraints. This has made it difficult to determine if resources are available for a programme this year.

October 26 is Fearless Friday, a day when dieters are encouraged to eat what they want without feeling guilty and without fearing weight gain.

The Centre hopes that by focusing on the pervasiveness of dieting and weight preoccupation, it can increase public awareness of the pressures on women to achieve unrealistic body ideals.

The motto for this year's Awareness Week is: "Thinness isn't the answer . . . it's what's inside that counts."

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