Forty-five percent of American women are on a diet on any given day, with 51% of 9 and 10 year old girls expressing that they would feel better about themselves if they were on a diet (Eating Disorder Awareness & Prevention, 1999). Even women who fall within the normal weight range perceive themselves as too heavy and continue to pursue this thin ideal (Napoli, Murgolo-Poore, & Boudville, 2003). Eighty-three percent of college aged women use dieting for weight loss and believe they would be 2% to 6% larger if they did not (Malinauskas, Raedke, Aeby, Smith, & Dallas, 2006).

Body dissatisfaction has led to a tireless pursuit of thinness, which has become a normative behavior among women in Western society (Dittrich, 2005). Thinness has not only come to represent attractiveness, but also has come to symbolize success, self-control and higher socioeconomic status. The media promote an unnatural body type, making it difficult for most women and men to accept natural beauty. For example, there is a discrepancy between reality and the media ideal. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the average American woman age 20-74 is 5’ 4” tall and weighs 164 pounds ("Americans are getting bigger but not taller," 2004). The average American model is 5’ 11” and weighs 117 pounds, and most fashion models are thinner than 98% of American women. Consequences of this discrepancy are that 80% of women are dissatisfied with their appearance (Goldberg, Bailey, Lenart, & Koff, 1996; Katz, 2005) and 75% of normal-weight women think they are too fat (The Ohio State University Body Image & Health Task Force, 1998).

Body image dissatisfaction and eating disorders are more prevalent among women than among men. This gender specificity is apparent in that over 90% of patients with anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa are women (Dittrich, 2005). Although clinical eating disorders are relatively uncommon in college women, subclinical eating disorders are far more prevalent (Mazzeo, 1999). Some researchers have found that as many as 20% of college women report having engaged in disordered eating behaviors. According to a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) study, these behaviors included binging, vomiting, laxatives, diuretics, diet pills, sauna, and steam bath (Johnson, Powers, & Dick, 1999). Mintz and Betz (1988) found that 61% of college women had some intermediate form of an eating disorder, such as chronic dieting, subclinical bulimia, or bingeing or purging alone. Only 33% of the subjects reported what could be considered normal eating habits. The degree of disturbed eating was strongly correlated with lowered self-esteem, more negative body image, greater tendency to endorse sociocultural beliefs regarding the desirability of female thinness, as well as obsessive thoughts concerning weight and appearance. Therefore, unhealthy eating behaviors may actually be considered relatively normative among undergraduate women (Mazzeo, 1999).