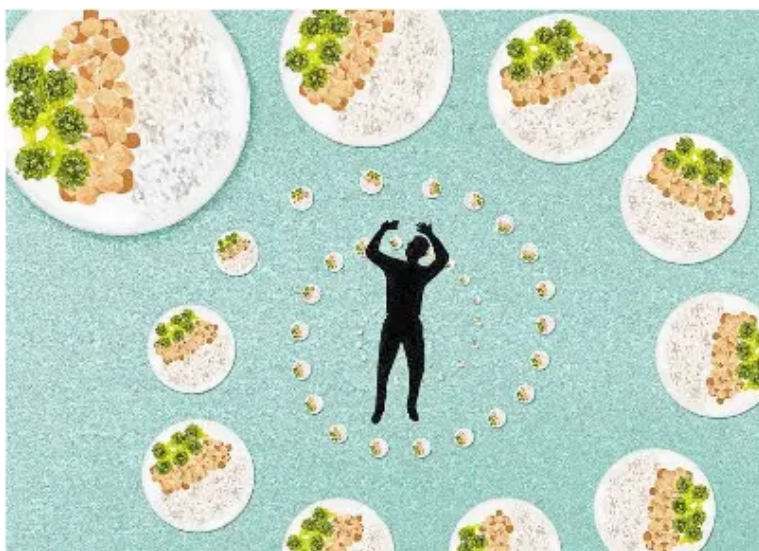


Is super-disciplined dieting actually an eating disorder?

Gym rats love flexing their chicken, broccoli, and rice meals on social media, but is this actually an eating disorder in disguise?

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If you're the type of person like me who gets a kick out of their beliefs being challenged on the regular and forming new insights over them like a sort of scab, then you'll love hanging out on social media. This week's interesting Threads debate is an incendiary prompt by someone who seems to be a body positivity advocate, directly saying that eating the same meals, especially for the purposes of fitness, is an eating disorder.



That means: Whether you are bulking (adding mass to your frame) or cutting (bringing down your body fat percentage), adherence to a strict set of food simply because it's healthy may look like an eating disorder— only that it's disguised by the virtue of clean eating.

Naturally, that thought immediately got people in a tizzy, especially the fitness junkies who loved meal prepping their chicken breast, broccoli, and rice meals to eat every day. After all, eating healthy food is only good for us, right? How is that possibly a disorder?

The short answer is: The claim has a basis, but it's been in limbo for nearly 30 years.

The disorder of being narrowly preoccupied with eating healthy for fitness and wellness purposes is called orthorexia nervosa. To be fair, this isn't just a normal hyperfixation on eating healthy: It's an obsession with making sure that everything you consume is pure, restricting your diet to a point where life is no longer fun because you have to weigh every nutrient that comes from everything you're putting in.

Maybe you might know someone who likes bringing their meal-prepped lunch to everything because they're chasing their macros or restricting their calories. While that is on the lower end of it, imagine that being turned all the way up to 11.

It also doesn't help that orthorexia can likely be a gateway to other eating disorders. Dieting, especially for fitness, isn't just eating healthy, but also eating less—and we all know many stories of

people heading squarely into anorexia nervosa territory by how much they're restricting themselves.

While a lot of dietitians and psychiatrists back the proposed disorder, and there is a lot of research and evidence supporting it being an actual thing, it doesn't have the support of the American Psychiatric Association, meaning it's not an officially recognized mental disorder. Think about it: It was proposed in 1997 by American doctor Steven Bratman, but it still isn't recognized officially after nearly 30 years.

And honestly, how could it when the benefits are technically, on its face, good for you? Especially when we deal with so many unhealthy and processed foods in nearly every aspect of our daily lives?

The moment I read that orthorexia nervosa was a thing, even if not medically recognized, I felt relieved because there was finally a name for the strange anxiety I was feeling when I was trying to religiously track my eating.

You see, back when I first actually started cutting weight at the start of 2020, I had discovered calorie tracking. MyFitnessPal (MFP) was then the gold standard of food and calorie tracking because the app made it simple, and it had a pretty definitive list of foods on its database, plus you could actually scan your food's bar code to instantly add its macro and calorie data in the app.

I wasn't doing it 100 percent correctly, but the mere notion that you get a ballpark range of the calories you consume in a day by eating "regular" food really changed how I ate back then, and even now. I learned how many calories a cup of rice really was—and that when I was eating my mom's home-cooked meals, I was actually taking in a lot more calories than I thought.

So for a time up until the middle of the pandemic, I had restricted my eating and agonized over every food choice I had to make. And, of course, I had to log everything I ate to the best of my ability on MFP. Overshooting my daily calorie limit, which was around 1,800 to 2,000, became a source of anxiety, especially once I learned how many calories my usual favorite foods had in certain amounts.

Then the pandemic happened, and the uncertainty of it all, plus the intake restrictions, meant I was at my lowest mentally. I explained all of this to my psychiatrist, and she immediately told me to start eating more because it wasn't worth getting both depressed about the pandemic and nervous about what I was eating during such a precarious time.

So even though I wasn't obsessively meal prepping, denying every lunch out invitation for packed food, and counting every calorie (more than I was counting macros), I was in that territory, and I can see how it was mentally negative enough to be considered a disorder. If I were able to feel an undercurrent of anxiety when I was doing it, I can only imagine how much worse it could be for people whose obsessions could get more intense.

I guess sometimes it's a good thing my ADHD lets me burn through hyperfixations quite fast. So, back to the original Threads post—many people were clowning the poster in the replies, saying things along the lines of it couldn't possibly be a disorder if the endgame is health. But although they specifically didn't name orthorexia, the very definition, according to Ursula Philpot, chair of the British Dietetic Association, is that people are "solely concerned with the quality of the food they put in their bodies, refining and restricting their diets according to their personal understanding of which foods are truly 'pure.'"

People think they don't have it, but their flexing of food that is "unfun" may suggest otherwise. I don't believe anyone's saying that the strict meal prep diet alone qualifies for the eating disorder—just that depending on it and depriving yourself of good and indulgent food too much might enter disordered eating territory.

Personally, and this is a completely unscientific take, but perhaps the biggest tell of whether or not you have a disorder is how fast you can walk away from your restrictive diet, and how guilty you feel when you eat unhealthily. I know I love my greasy, fatty food, and I still feel a tinge of guilt whenever I go on a binge on a bad day, but I think that's in line with the normal range of regret one should feel.

And if you're on a diet, I hope that it never derails your enjoyment of your life, and you always come back to food that feels good.