

# Food tracking causes more harm than good

## Staff Editorial

\*name changed for confidentiality

When senior \*Brianna Adams was a sophomore, she vividly remembers enjoying oven-baked Cheetos during lunch. Seeing as though she was exercising a lot during the height of her colorguard season that fall, Adams never felt guilty about her snacking. Such thoughts changed for her in the week that health students had to track what they were eating.

"I [didn't] want to enjoy my Cheetos because I [could] see that it was increasing the number of calories," Adams said.

According to Adams, tracking her food intake only made her want to consume less. She was given a certain amount of calories that was "correct" for her body, and whenever she noticed that she was nearing that number, it made her think that she shouldn't eat her next meal.

Following the nutrition unit in her health class, Adams noticed a significant decrease in her appetite as her depression worsened in the winter. She perceived this as a positive opportunity to lose weight.

"Obviously, that was not the healthiest line of reasoning, and I do think that part of that [mindset] is being taught that you need to watch your calories," Adams said. "[I thought] 'I'm getting fewer calories, so this must be a good thing.'"

Health teacher Michele Burnett said that the primary goal of the nutrition unit in health class is to make students more aware of what they are putting into their bodies. Additionally, a large portion of the unit focuses on helping students understand the six essential nutrients — protein, fat, carbohydrates, minerals, vitamins and water.

In order to achieve this goal, students track their activity levels and food intake to see how much sugar, sodium, protein, carbohydrates, fat and calories that they are consuming. This activity ties into a discussion about Type II diabetes, high blood pressure, other diseases that can come from an unhealthy diet and health risks associated with obesity.

Students log their food using an app called MyFitnessPal. This app has an age requirement of 18, meaning that 15 and 16-year-old sophomores are instructed to change their birthdate when they download it for this activity.

Burnett is fully aware of this age restriction and has spoken to all of her supervisors about it in the past. She acknowledges that the age requirement is put in place because all aspects of the application are not designed for child use.

"Telling us to change our birth year is just sort of ignoring the app's reasoning for making an age requirement," Adams said.

However, Burnett feels that it is appropriate for sophomores to use in class because they are not utilizing all facets of the app; they do not use the exercise feature that logs calories burned while exercising or the community feature that allows other members of MyFitnessPal to post to discussion forums.

Additionally, when filling out the goals section of their profile, all students are told to select "maintain weight." Burnett makes it very clear that they are not doing the activity to gain or lose weight.

"The sole focus is just to get [students] to be aware that we're not just a person that's bringing in calories," Burnett said. "I could bring in 2000 calories worth of milkshakes in a day, and that's not good. It's not only just the calories we're bringing in but what [nutrients] we're getting from those calories."

Senior \*Catherine Matters was unaware of what MyFitnessPal was until she saw her friend logging his food for health class during the first semester of their sophomore year. Matters did not have health until second semester, but she downloaded the application beforehand, hoping that it would help her lose weight.

Matters has mixed feelings about calorie-counting. She has struggled with binge eating habits — frequently consuming unusually large amounts of food in one sitting and feeling that eating behavior is out of control. Matters feels that using MyFitnessPal helps her keep her binges in check.

On the other hand, tracking her food encourages her to have a negative perception of food and reach for the lowest calorie op-



**HIDING IN HEALTH:** A girl struggling with an eating disorder sits at a desk, feeling overwhelmed. Surrounding her are triggering phrases and words that can have a negative impact on a person who has a rocky relationship with food. (cartoon by Sarah Ryan)

tions at all times.

"[Using MyFitnessPal] has definitely affected my relationship with food," Matters said. "I definitely don't eat as much because I'm scared of the calories."

When Matters thought back to her experience in health class, she held one disturbing memory. While the students were going up to the teacher to show her their food logs, some girls in the class were bragging about their log, saying "I only ate 800 calories yesterday" or "Look, I barely ate anything today."

"That really rubbed me the wrong way," Matters said. "It [became] a competition of 'how little did you eat today.'"

Matters was unaware of the age restriction on the application, but she was not surprised to hear about it — she has seen countless [TikToks](#) where teenagers point to MyFitnessPal as the cause of their [eating disorder habits](#).

"Of course, everyone should be the healthiest they can be, but calories are not equal to health," Matters said.

Adams and Matters both agree that calorie counting and food tracking should be completely omitted from the health curriculum. According to Burnett, students are able to opt out of the activity if they would like to; she has had students with eating disorders do this in the past.

Senior \*Riley Shannon, who was diagnosed with an eating disorder during her junior year, knows that she would not have been able to share this sort of information with her health teacher.

"I feel like I wouldn't say anything because I'd almost be embarrassed or [feel] like my problems wouldn't be enough to opt out of the whole activity," Shannon said.

Shannon struggled with logging her food in health class because she was not eating much at the time. This was around the time that her [body dysmorphia](#) developed and was greatly amplified by toxic social media.

"My relationship with food is complicated because some days it's really easy to eat if I'm not thinking about it, and other days it's a lot harder," Shannon said. "I guess I just feel like I don't deserve food for whatever reason."

Michele Hart, a psychologist who works at [Family Recovery Centers](#), typically works with adolescents aged 12-18. According to Hart, eating disorder habits tend to form around middle school to a person's early 20s.

"We know that people who have or are more likely to develop eating disorders tend to be more excessive and perfectionistic, so if you give them a certain calorie count ... they see it as 'Well, I'm going to get exactly that number, or I'm going to get below that, and that's better,'" Hart said.

Hart believes that the best way to teach

nutrition to teenagers is by showing them what a healthy plate looks like and then having a very open discussion about it. This could include talking about the fears that may accompany eating.

For people with eating disorders, Hart said that they will sometimes use the applications [Recovery Record](#) or [Rise Up + Recover](#) in conjunction with therapy during the recovery process. Meals are still logged on these apps, but they have an additional feature that connects the user with their therapist or dietitian to receive feedback and support.

**We, The Prospector, feel that the use of MyFitnessPal is not appropriate for sophomore year health class. Although the health teachers are not intentionally encouraging students to lose weight during the nutrition unit, the act of tracking food and counting calories is enough to cause certain students to develop eating disorder habits. As mentioned by Hart, tracking calories could have a negative effect on certain students with competitive tendencies or on any student that struggles with body image.**

**With these requests, we are not implying that the health curriculum or health teachers are promoting eating disorders.**

**In place of the food tracking activity, we propose a unit on body positivity with a focus on [intuitive eating](#) — making food choices without experiencing guilt, honoring hunger, respecting fullness and enjoying the pleasure of eating.**

**We understand that the amount of sophomores who suffer from eating disorders are a small percentage, but they should not be obligated to disclose a very sensitive and personal issue to a teacher in order to avoid logging their food, which can facilitate damaging habits for them. Furthermore, as seen in Adams' case, a student may not even be aware that food tracking could have a negative impact on their perception of food and would not know to opt out beforehand.**

**Every student would benefit from a nutrition unit that teaches nutrition without sacrificing mental health for numbers, and we do not feel that the current health curriculum is doing so.**

"I don't feel that [the health curriculum is] advocating for self love," Matters said. "They should be, especially for teenagers."

As done in the units that deal with sexual assault and addiction, we believe that it would be very impactful for students to hear a presentation from either an eating disorder survivor or a person who specializes in teaching healthy food habits such as a [Be Body Positive Facilitator](#). This would provide students with the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of themselves and their relationship with food and their body image.

"From what I got out of [health class], which was the calorie counting ... it's made me want to eat rice cakes and really low-calorie things that are not fuel for [my] body," Matters said. ♪



Voting results of The Prospector staff in regards to this editorial.