

MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL

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2
3
4 “Hurry up, Reece, we’re gonna be late for class if we don’t go eat lunch now!” shouted Emma exasperatedly, as she
5 watched her roommate check her hair and makeup in the mirror for what seemed like the hundredth time that day.

6
7 “Don’t worry, Emma, we have plenty of time,” said Charelle, coming down the hall and stopping in the door to
8 Emma and Reece’s dorm room. “And Reece, honey, you know you look gorgeous, so stop fussing and let’s go.”

9
10 “Oh, you two, give me a break. I have to make sure my hair looks good, ‘cause nothing else does today,” explained
11 Reece. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror: *You’re fat, fat, fat*, the mirror told her.

12
13 Charelle looked at Emma with a question in her eyes. Emma nodded and then said, “Yeah, today’s once of Reece’s
14 ‘fat’ days. She told me that before she even got out of bed this morning.”

15
16 “Girlfriend, what do you weigh? All of 130?” asked Charelle.

17
18 “Fine, make fun of me all you want. You don’t understand. I ate a bowl of cereal, two pieces of bread, a piece of
19 cheese, two slices of pizza, and three chocolate chip cookies yesterday. I must have gained five pounds just since
20 yesterday.” Reece turned and glanced into the mirror on the wall above her dresser one last time, running her fingers
21 through her straight, shoulder-length blond hair. *They don’t understand what’s like to be fat*, she thought to herself.
22 *If only I had Emma’s figure; she’s so thin, and she never had to watch what she eats. I’m so fat. Today I will only*
23 *eat vegetables and drink water. And I have to spend 30 extra minutes at the gym. That should make up for*
24 *yesterday’s calories.*

25
26 Turning toward her friends, Reece grabbed her backpack off the bed and slung it over her shoulder. “Let’s go then,
27 if you two are in such a hurry to eat lunch before class.”

In the Cafeteria

28
29
30 Reece grabbed a tray from the bin next to the front doors of the cafeteria, tossing silverware and a napkin on the
31 tray’s shiny silver surface as she slid it down the railing to the first station, the salad bar. She lifted a plate from the
32 stack next to the salad bar and carefully selected an assortment of raw vegetables – carrots, celery, broccoli,
33 cucumbers – ignoring the cauliflower, which she disliked with a passion. *Some ranch dressing would be really good*
34 *with these veggies*, she thought to herself. *But I can’t have those calories after the horrible day I had yesterday. I*
35 *have to make up for all that bad food I ate. I shouldn’t have eaten those cookies last night before I went to bed. I*
36 *can’t believe I did that. How stupid can I be?* Turning back to her friends, who were piling their plates with salad –
37 complete with lots of dressing she noticed – Reece said, “I’m done. I’ll grab us a table.”

38
39 Reece turned and walked toward the checkout line, leaving Charelle and Emma standing there looking at each other,
40 their mouths wide open. Emma recovered first, answering Charelle’s questioning look with a nod, saying, “Yeah,
41 she’s been on this weird diet kick lately. If she has a ‘bad’ day, like she eats something she doesn’t think she should
42 have, she tries to make up for it the next day, by just eating raw vegetables and drinking water.”

43
44 “That sounds like punishment to me,” replied Charalle, shuddering at the thought. “And what’s up with her listing
45 off every single thing she ate yesterday? I’ve never heard her do that before.”

46
47 “Oh, she does that every night. She calls it her private time,” explained Emma. “She told me she lies in bed at night
48 and lists out everything she ate that day. Then she decides what she can eat the next day based on that.”

49
50 “I don’t understand her obsession with her weight,” said Charelle. “I mean, she’s not fat. She’s what? A size eight?”

51
52 “Yeah, but when she was really young, she had a problem with her weight. Then she lost a whole bunch of weight in
53 high school, but when she came to college she gained some of it back. Now she is trying to get back to where she
54 was in high school.”

56 *At the Table*

57 Reece leaned back in her chair and tried not to watch Emma eat the piece of carrot cake she had chosen for dessert.
58 Even after eating most of the vegetables and drinking a glass of water, she still felt hungry. “Well, that’s what you
59 get, she said to herself. *If you hadn’t made such a pig out of yourself yesterday, you might be able to have a piece of*
60 *cake. But no, you had to be a pig. That’s all you are, you know. A fat pig. Ever since third grade, when those kids*
61 *made fun of you.... Reece’s thoughts drifted back to Mrs. Wright’s third grade classroom:*

62
63 Reece glanced down at her shoes as she walked to the front of the classroom. Painfully shy, she dreaded
64 having to be in front of other children. And now Mrs. Wright had called on her to solve a math problem on
65 the chalkboard! As she walked past Mary’s desk, Reece heard Mary and Mary’s best friend Lisa
66 whispering and giggling. Then she heard Mary say under her breath, “Nice pants. Where did you get ‘um?
67 Tents R’ Us?” Reece turned bright red and her footsteps faltered as Mary’s cruel comment sank in. *I can’t*
68 *help it, she thought, that my mom makes my clothes for me. If only I weren’t so fat, she chastised herself; I*
69 *could find clothes to fit me like normal people do.* Reece continued her progression toward the front of the
70 room, inwardly shaking at the cruelty of the two girls she so desperately wanted to be her friends. Then
71 she heard the unmistakable whisper of Jimmy St. John coming from her left. “Boom. Boom. Boom,” he
72 chanted, ridiculing her as she walked haltingly up the seemingly endless aisle. Children around him began
73 laughing as they heard his taunts. Reece turned an even brighter shade of scarlet and wished desperately
74 that she could sink on the floor and disappear forever. *If only I were skinny, she thought, they would like*
75 *me. Then I would be popular and everybody would want to be my friend.*

76
77 Hey, girlfriend, what are you daydreaming about? Aren’t you going to finish your rabbit-food lunch before it wilts?”
78 Charelle’s strident voice interrupted Reece’s painful recollection and brought her back to the present with a start.
79 She mentally shook herself, *Now there’s no need to be thinking about that still. You know that you have been*
80 *working hard to lose weight ever since that day in third grade. If you hadn’t regained a bunch weight when you*
81 *came to college, you would still be as thin as you were in high school. No matter what it takes, you have to get back*
82 *there.*

83
84 “Hey Reece, you wanna try a bite of this carrot cake? It’s even better than the chocolate cake they were serving last
85 week,” offered Emma.

86
87 “No thanks, Em,” Reece said. “I’ll never lose those last 10 pounds if I eat cake.”

88
89 “Ten pounds!” exclaimed Charelle. “Where in the world do you think you’re going to lose 10 pounds?”

90
91 “I have to lose 10 pounds to get down to 120,” explained Reese. “That’s what I’m supposed to weigh.”

92
93 “According to whom?” asked Charelle.

94
95 “I don’t remember where I read it,” said Reece. “One of the fashion magazines had an equation in it to figure your
96 ideal weigh. You should weigh 100 pound if you’re five feet tall and then add five pounds for every inch over five
97 feet. Since I’m 5’4”, I should weigh 120.”

98
99 “What does your father think of that equation?” asked Emma with a slight frown.

100
101 “Well my dad says it’s not right and that I shouldn’t follow it,” Reece said. “He has a chart from the American
102 Medical Association that came in one of his medical journals that he gave me to look at, but it said I should weigh
103 more than 120. And that can’t be right, because I’d look fat. So I’m using the equation.”

104
105 “Your father the doctor said to ignore the equation you read in some fashion mag, but you think he’s wrong!”
106 exclaimed Emma questioningly.

107
108 “Well, if I want to look the way I should,” said Reece defensively, “I need to lose at least 10 pounds.” As she picked
109 up a carrot stick off her plate, Reece eyed the thick slice of carrot cake on Emma’s plate. *I would really like to try*
110 *that carrot cake, she thought, instantly reprimanding herself forever thinking that. How do you think you’re going to*

111 *lose weight and be beautiful if you can't even stay away from junk food?* Even as she chastised herself, though,
112 Reece was contemplating the carrot cake again. She reached over and pinched off a tiny piece of the cream cheese
113 frosting, placing it on her tongue and relishing its sweetness as it dissolved in her mouth. *What an idiot!* she
114 screamed at herself. *You are too weak. You'll never be thin. You can't resist temptation, so there's no way you're*
115 *going to be able to diet. You just need to stop eating completely. Obviously you can't even come down to the*
116 *cafeteria without cheating, so from now on you'll stay in your room and drink water.* She pushed her plate away
117 from her, cringing at the harsh things she was saying to herself but unable to stop.

118
119 “You can't be full already,” said Charelle. “You haven't eaten anything.”
120

121 “Leave me along,” cried Reece. “I'm not hungry.” She shoved her chair back from the table and stood, gathering her
122 tray and her backpack. “I'm going to class,” I have a few questions to ask Professor Lane before class starts.” She
123 turned abruptly and walked away from the table, leaving her two friends staring open-mouthed at her back, confused
124 by her sudden burst of temper.

125
126 “What's up with that?” asked Charelle. “I don't think I've ever see her that upset. What did I say?”
127

128 “Oh nothing,” said Emma. “She's like this sometimes when she's upset about her weight. She gets really quiet and
129 withdrawn and is overly sensitive if you criticize her in any way.”

130
131 “I don't understand,” said Charelle. “She's not fat. I think she's beautiful just as she it.”
132

133 “I know, I know. But she thinks she's fat. And nothing anyone says will change her mind.”
134

135 “I just don't get why she's so hard on herself.”
136

137 “I know, I don't either.”
138

139 ***In Class Later That Afternoon***

140 “Okay, class, quiet down. Today we're going to continue our discussion of body image by talking with Dr. Susan
141 Holland, an expert in eating disorders.” Professor Lane introduced the guest speaker to her Psychology 125 class and
142 took a seat at the back of the room.

143
144 Dr. Holland thanked Professor Lane and the class for allowing her to visit them and share information on eating
145 disorders.

146
147 “Did you know that dieting has reached almost epidemic proportions?” she asked the class. “Depending on what
148 study you read, it has been estimated that as many as 60-80 percent of adolescent girls are dieting at any given time.
149 And obsession with being thin can lead to eating disorders.”

150
151 “But doesn't that just apply to girls?” questioned one young man in the front row.
152

153 “Well, it does seem to apply especially to women, but more and more men are beginning to worry about their
154 weight, as well. Research studies have found that women are generally more concerned and less satisfied with their
155 physical appearance than men. Women are also more likely to weigh themselves, to describe themselves as fat, to
156 think that their current figure is heavier than their ideal figure, and to not see themselves as underweight even when
157 they are,” Dr. Holland continued. “I read the results from a survey done by Psychology Today magazine. Eighty-
158 nine percent of all of the females responding to the survey reported that they wanted to lose weight. And I have a
159 question for you to think about. You don't have to answer this out loud, but just think... how many years of your life
160 would you give up to be your ideal weight?”

161
162 A wave of laughter and a few gasps raced through the class as the students thought about Dr. Holland's question.
163

164 *I would probably give up a few years to weigh 120,* thought Reece.
165

166 Emma considered the same question herself. *How can anyone give up years of their life to change their weight?*
167 *Don't they know life is precious? I can't imagine being so upset over your weight that you would actually give up*
168 *years of your life!*

169
170 As the class pondered her question, Dr. Holland shared more information with them from the survey. "In response to
171 the question I just asked you" she said, "15 percent of women and 11 percent of men said they would sacrifice more
172 than five years of their life to be their ideal weight. Twenty-four percent of women and 17 percent of men said they
173 would give up more than three years."

174
175 "I can't believe anyone would willingly give up years of their life to be a different weight," stated a young African
176 American woman in the back of the room. "I mean, I could probably stand to lose 20 to 30 pounds if I had to, but I
177 would never give up years of my life to do it. I mean, God gave me life, and He's the only one who can take it away.
178 And He loves me the way I am."

179
180 "I don't know," replied a young European American woman. "I can see where people might be willing to do that.
181 There's an awful lot of pressure put on women to lose weight. I have a lot of friends who do some pretty extreme
182 things to try to lose weight. In fact, two of my roommates are anorexic and one of them is an exercise freak. Being
183 thin is like an obsession with them."

184
185 "Unfortunately many women are obsessed with losing weight," said Dr. Holland. "Some people would do anything
186 to lose weight, and their desire to lose weight may not always be linked to an actual weight problem. Who can think
187 of things that thinness symbolizes in American culture?"

188
189 As soon as she asked the question, answers came flying from around the room.

190
191 "Beauty."

192
193 "Popularity."

194
195 "If you're thin, you have lots of friends and people will like you."

196
197 "Thinness equals success."

198
199 "It you're thin, that means you have control over your life."

200
201 "All of those things are true," said Dr. Holland. "In our culture, thinness has come to mean many different things,
202 and many women – especially white women – have internalized the standard of thinness and use it to judge their
203 own attractiveness."

204
205 "I don't understand what the big deal is," said a young European American woman. "What's the big deal if we want
206 to be slim?"

207
208 "It's a big deal," replied Dr. Holland, "when the desire to be thin begins to affect your health. And there are many
209 health risks associated with being too thin: eating disorders can cause women to stop menstruating, cause severe
210 damage to kidneys and other internal organs, and even lead to death.

211
212 "When women have internalized the cultural standards of thinness and use that standard to judge themselves, they
213 often don't measure up. And if they don't measure up, if they weight more than they think they should, they may
214 feel less worthy, like they are less of a person. And this feeling may affect their self-esteem and their self-
215 confidence.

216
217 "I don't really understand," said a young man in the middle of the room. "Where do women get this pressure? I
218 mean I've never said anything to my girlfriend about her weight, but she's constantly talking about losing weight."
219

220 “It’s everywhere,” cried the women sitting beside him. “You hear it from the media, from your parents, from your
221 friends, from guys....”
222
223 “Yeah, sometimes guys are the worst,” said another young woman. “They are constantly making comments about
224 really thin women, like ‘She’s so hot,’ or ‘What a body.’ What are we supposed to think?”
225
226 “That’s not true of all guys,” exclaimed another woman in the class. “My guy friends who are African American say
227 that they like a women with a few curves. They don’t want women who look like Kate Moss.”
228
229 “That brings up an important issue,” said Dr. Holland, raising her hand to quiet the building conversation the last
230 few comments had inspired. “There is often a difference among racial groups. African American culture, for
231 example, seems to be more accepting of weight than European American culture. One study done in 1993 found that
232 even though the African American women were heavier overall as a group, twice as many African American women
233 as European American women were satisfied with the shape of their body as it was. And a 1995 study found that
234 European American women reported feeling significantly more pressure to be thin than did African American
235 women.”
236
237 At the end of class, Dr. Holland fielded a few final questions and then thanked the students for their lively
238 participation. As the students field from the room, Emma caught up with Reece and tapped her on the shoulder.
239
240 “Hey friend,” she said. “Want to go watch the women’s field hockey game with me?”
241
242 “Can’t,” replied Reece. “I’m going to the gym to work out.”
243
244 “Can’t you wait and go later?” asked Emma.
245
246 “No,” I have to put in an extra half hour today, and then I have to go to the Student Advisory Board meeting. Then I
247 have gobs of homework to do.”
248
249 “Want to meet for supper then?” Emma asked.
250
251 “No, thanks, I’m going to be too busy to eat tonight, I think,” said Reece.
252
253 “Reece, come on, you have to eat. Especially after you ate hardly anything for lunch.”
254
255 “No,” Reece replied firmly. “If I’m going to lose weight, I have to eat less.”
256
257 “Didn’t you listen to what Dr. Holland was saying?” Emma asked. “Don’t let the thin ideal run – or ruin – your life.”
258
259 “Got to go,” said Reece, ignoring her friend’s question. “See you later.”
260
261 Emma shook her head sadly as she watched her best friend head toward the gym. *What can I do to help her get over*
262 *the obsession with her weight?* she wondered. *I’m afraid she’s going to hurt herself, but she just doesn’t seem to see*
263 *what she’s doing.”*
264
265 As Reece entered the door of the gym, she mentally ran through her exercise plan for the day. *I’ll stretch out and*
266 *then use the Stairmaster for 30 minutes. Then I’ll run two miles on the track and do another 30 minutes on the*
267 *exercise bike. Maybe that’ll make up for all that junk I ate yesterday. If I do 45 minutes on the exercise bike, maybe I*
268 *can eat supper tonight,* she thought. Instantly she mentally corrected herself. *No, I can’t. Those ten pounds are going*
269 *to be hard to lose, and I can’t let myself cheat.* As she headed for the locker room, Reece glanced in the mirrored
270 wall by the stairs. *You’re fat,* the mirror told her, *but if you work hard enough maybe someday you’ll be thin.* Reece
271 struggled in vain to ignore the hunger pangs in her stomach and tried to envision herself looking in the mirror and
272 seeing her new, thin body. *Whatever it takes,* she told herself, *that’s what I’ll do. Whatever it takes to be thin.*
273
274

Davies-Popelka, W. (2000). Mirror, mirror on the wall. In Braithwaite, Dawn, & Ratcliffe, G. (Eds.). Case studies in interpersonal communication process and problems (pp. 53 – 71). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.

275
276

Concepts/Terminology illustrated in this Case Study
(there may be others from Chapter 1-3 that I missed)

Intrapersonal communication
Self-concept (self-image/self-esteem)
Race/ethnicity
Image Management
Self-sabotage
Perception
Social comparison
Reflected appraisal
Reference groups
Self-fulfilling prophecy
Perceived/Presenting Self
Punctuation
Empathy/sympathy
Relational Messages
Transactional Model

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