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

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

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

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

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

“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 cheese, two slices of pizza, and three chocolate chip cookies yesterday. I must have gained five pounds just since yesterday.” Reece turned and glanced into the mirror on the wall above her dresser one last time, running her fingers through her straight, shoulder-length blond hair. They don’t understand what’s like to be fat, she thought to herself. 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 eat vegetables and drink water. And I have to spend 30 extra minutes at the gym. That should make up for yesterday’s calories.

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

In the Cafeteria
Reece grabbed a tray from the bin next to the front doors of the cafeteria, tossing silverware and a napkin on the 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 stack next to the salad bar and carefully selected an assortment of raw vegetables – carrots, celery, broccoli, cucumbers – ignoring the cauliflower, which she disliked with a passion. Some ranch dressing would be really good with these veggies, she thought to herself. But I can’t have those calories after the horrible day I had yesterday. I 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 can’t believe I did that. How stupid can I be? Turning back to her friends, who were piling their plates with salad – complete with lots of dressing she noticed – Reece said, “I’m done. I’ll grab us a table.”

Reece turned and walked toward the checkout line, leaving Charelle and Emma standing there looking at each other, their mouths wide open. Emma recovered first, answering Charelle’s questioning look with a nod, saying, “Yeah, 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 have, she tries to make up for it the next day, by just eating raw vegetables and drinking water.”

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

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

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

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

**At the Table**

Reece leaned back in her chair and tried not to watch Emma eat the piece of carrot cake she had chosen for dessert. Even after eating most of the vegetables and drinking a glass of water, she still felt hungry. “Well, that’s what you 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 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 made fun of you…. Reece’s thoughts drifted back to Mrs. Wright’s third grade classroom:

Reece glanced down at her shoes as she walked to the front of the classroom. Painfully shy, she dreaded having to be in front of other children. And now Mrs. Wright had called on her to solve a math problem on the chalkboard! As she walked past Mary’s desk, Reece heard Mary and Mary’s best friend Lisa whispering and giggling. Then she heard Mary say under her breath, “Nice pants. Where did you get ‘um? Tents R’ Us?” Reece turned bright red and her footsteps faltered as Mary’s cruel comment sank in. I can’t help it, she thought, that my mom makes my clothes for me. If only I weren’t so fat, she chastised herself; I could find clothes to fit me like normal people do. Reece continued her progression toward the front of the room, inwardly shaking at the cruelty of the two girls she so desperately wanted to be her friends. Then she heard the unmistakable whisper of Jimmy St. John coming from her left. “Boom. Boom. Boom,” he chanted, ridiculing her as she walked haltingly up the seemingly endless aisle. Children around him began laughing as they heard his taunts. Reece turned an even brighter shade of scarlet and wished desperately that she could sink on the floor and disappear forever. If only I were skinny, she thought, they would like me. Then I would be popular and everybody would want to be my friend.
Hey, girlfriend, what are you daydreaming about? Aren’t you going to finish your rabbit-food lunch before it wilts?” Charelle’s strident voice interrupted Reece’s painful recollection and brought her back to the present with a start. She mentally shook herself, Now there’s no need to be thinking about that still. You know that you have been working hard to lose weight ever since that day in third grade. If you hadn’t regained a bunch weight when you 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 there.

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

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

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

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

“According to whom?” asked Charelle.

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

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

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

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

“Well, if I want to look the way I should,” said Reece defensively, “I need to lose at least 10 pounds.” As she picked 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 that carrot cake, she thought, instantly reprimanding herself forever thinking that. How do you think you’re going to lose weight and be beautiful if you can’t even stay away from junk food? Even as she chastised herself, though, Reece was contemplating the carrot cake again. She reached over and pinched off a tiny piece of the cream cheese frosting, placing it on her tongue and relishing its sweetness as it dissolved in her mouth. What an idiot! she screamed at herself. You are too weak. You’ll never be thin. You can’t resist temptation, so there’s no way you’re going to be able to diet. You just need to stop eating completely. Obviously you can’t even come down to the cafeteria without cheating, so from now
She pushed her plate away from her, cringing at the harsh things she was saying to herself but unable to stop.

“You can’t be full already,” said Charelle. “You haven’t eaten anything.”

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

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

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

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

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

“I just don’t get why she’s so hard on herself.”

“I know, I don’t either.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I can’t believe anyone would willingly give up yeas of their life to be a different weight,” stated a young African American women in the back of the room. “I mean, I could probably stand to lose 20 to 30 pounds if I had to, but I 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. And He loves me the way I am.”

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

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

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

“Beauty.”

“Popularity.”

“If you’re thin, you have lots of friends and people will like you.”

“Thinness equals success.”

“It you’re thin, that means you have control over your life.”
“All of those things are true,” said Dr. Holland. “In our culture, thinness has come to mean many
different things, and many women – especially white women – have internalized the standard of
thinness and use it to judge their own attractiveness.”

“I don’t understand what the big deal is,” said a young European American woman. “What’s the
big deal if we want to be slim?”

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

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

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

“It’s everywhere,” cried the women sitting beside him. “You hear it from the media, from your
parents, from your friends, from guys….”

“Yeah, sometimes guys are the worst,” said another young woman. “They are constantly making
comments about really thin women, like ‘She’s so hot,’ or ‘What a body.’ What are we supposed
to think?”

“That’s not true of all guys,” exclaimed another woman in the class. “My guy friends who are
African American say that they like a women with a few curves. They don’t want women who
look like Kate Moss.”

“That brings up an important issue,” said Dr. Holland, raising her hand to quiet the building
conversation the last few comments had inspired. “There is often a difference among racial
groups. African American culture, for example, seems to be more accepting of weight than
European American culture. One study done in 1993 found that even though the African
American women were heavier overall as a group, twice as many African American women as
European American women were satisfied with the shape of their body as it was. And a 1995
study found that European American women reported feeling significantly more pressure to be
thin than did African American women.”

At the end of class, Dr. Holland fielded a few final questions and then thanked the students for
their lively participation. As the students filed from the room, Emma caught up with Reece and
tapped her on the shoulder.

“Hey friend,” she said. “Want to go watch the women’s field hockey game with me?”

(Eds.). Case studies in interpersonal communication process and problems (pp. 53 – 71).
“Can’t,” replied Reece. “I’m going to the gym to work out.”

“Can’t you wait and go later?” asked Emma.

“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 have gobs of homework to do.”

“Want to meet for supper then?” Emma asked.

“No, thanks, I’m going to be too busy to eat tonight, I think,” said Reece.

“Reece, come on, you have to eat. Especially after you ate hardly anything for lunch.”

“No,” Reece replied firmly. “If I’m going to lose weight, I have to eat less.”

“Didn’t you listen to what Dr. Holland was saying?” Emma asked. “Don’t let the thin ideal run – or ruin – your life.”

“Got to go,” said Reece, ignoring her friend’s question. “See you later.”

Emma shook her head sadly as she watched her best friend head toward the gym. What can I do to help her get over the obsession with her weight? she wondered. I’m afraid she’s going to hurt herself, but she just doesn’t seem to see what she’s doing.

As Reece entered the door of the gym, she mentally ran through her exercise plan for the day. I’ll stretch out and then use the Stairmaster for 30 minutes. Then I’ll run two miles on the track and do another 30 minutes on the 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 can eat supper tonight, she thought. Instantly she mentally corrected herself. No, I can’t. Those ten pounds are going to be hard to lose, and I can’t let myself cheat. As she headed for the locker room, Reece glanced in the mirrored wall by the stairs. You’re fat, the mirror told her, but if you work hard enough maybe someday you’ll be thin. Reece struggled in vain to ignore the hunger pangs in her stomach and tried to envision herself looking in the mirror and seeing her new, thin body. Whatever it takes, she told herself, that’s what I’ll do. Whatever it takes to be thin.

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

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