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Erin O'Flaherty
University of Central Florida

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Some People Trying to *Look* Fit Adopt Unhealthy Lifestyles

By Erin O'Flaherty
UCF Forum columnist
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I see so many young women going to extreme measures these days trying to look fit, but while losing weight they end up reflecting the opposite of a healthy lifestyle.

I am 20 years old and 5'6". On a regular basis my scale tells me that I'm right around 125 pounds. I have been an athlete my entire life and I work out daily, mixing strength training with running. I can run one mile at a seven-minute pace, or multiple miles at an eight and a half-minute pace. My calorie intake is 1,300 a day, and I use an app to track everything I eat.

I'm not touting my fitness for no reason. I'm an athlete and competitor within the Miss America Organization as the reigning Miss University of Central Florida. MAO is the world's largest provider of scholarships to women 17-24 and I cannot say enough about the wonderful things this organization has brought to my life. Apart from scholarship money, I've gained self-confidence, a genuine commitment to community service, a clearer vision of my career and academic goals, and lifelong friends.

By competing for local titles in hopes of achieving the dream jobs of Miss Florida and Miss America, I willingly subject myself to being judged on a 1-10 scale by a panel of judges in five categories, including interview, talent and evening wear.

But there is one aspect of competition that I have always thought has been a bit behind the times: swimsuit. You know the drill. Contestants put on bathing suits and strut around stage to high-tempo music. The task is to look confident!

The swimsuit phase now is delicately named “Lifestyle and Fitness.” The name was changed when Miss America 1951, Yolanda Betbeze, refused to participate in a swimwear-only photo shoot because it was awkward. Well, Yolanda, I agree. Sadly, changing the name seems to be the only change to this phase of competition that’s been made in 62 years.

That competition has little, if anything, to do with the actual lifestyle or fitness of the competitors. Behind the scenes, pressures to obtain a certain number on the scale, somewhere below the 110 range for a contestant of my height, far outweigh any focus on fitness. I feel there is a constant, looming pressure to emphasize the number on the scale rather than a number on a weight or stopwatch. On stage, the woman who is simply thin is consistently awarded more points and attention compared to the one who may weigh more, but actually has a healthier “lifestyle and fitness” level.

I’ll be honest, this has given me great pause where pursuing my dream of being Miss America is concerned. It’s not because I am averse to putting in hard work to sustain a healthy lifestyle. In fact, with or without the Miss America Organization, I already focus on a healthy lifestyle because the benefits of exercise extend well beyond the physical rewards.

It’s also not because the Miss America Organization has unintentionally placed an over-emphasis on the swimsuit aspect of competition. The MAO stands for so much more than that, which is why I am, ultimately, so proud to be a competitor within it.

It is because so many women go to extremes. When judges determine how fit a contestant is based solely on how thin her frame is, the result breeds pursuit of an unhealthy body image among competitors. If we continue to approach the lifestyle and fitness category on this basis, then just call it what it is: a continued emphasis on a body ideal that very, very few will ever attain, let alone sustain.

It would be better to reform the ways we judge how physically fit a contestant is. The first thing that comes to mind is an actual fitness test.

My involvement in the Miss America Organization is but one example, of course, of a culturally misplaced emphasis on weight over fitness. Most people evaluate themselves using fun-house mirrors because most of society views beauty as a quality of the young and uber-skinny. I can't change my genetic makeup, a natural hourglass shape, any more than I can change my shoe size. What I can change is my level of fitness. I can set goals to maintain a regimen that boosts my metabolism and builds lean muscle. While previous generations have had growing life expectancies, the National Center for Health Statistics states that for the first time, those in my generation can't expect to live as long as our parents.

Is my fitness accurately being judged by a score of 1-10 as I walk across a stage nearly naked? No. It's our job to instill a realistic and attainable level of health and fitness in our generation.

Erin O'Flaherty is a senior pursuing a bachelor's degree in accounting and the current Miss University of Central Florida. She can be reached at eoflaherty@knights.ucf.edu.