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Hunger and Obesity Coexist

Hunger and obesity can and do coexist around the world. This paper will focus on nutritional problems found in the United States. It may seem strange that in a land of plenty, indeed, a land of surplus, small pockets of poverty still exist in the United States. Hunger and food insecurity have been called America's "hidden crisis." Obesity has been declared an epidemic. In these next few pages I am going to focus on many ideas having to do with the problems of obesity and hunger. I will point out some characteristics of a typical obese family and a typical hungry family. I will present some interesting research and statistics about the two groups. I will point out what some consequences of hunger and obesity are. I will also define what is termed food insecurity, which leads to different kinds of hunger and obesity. I will also relate how a change in the economy and a shift from a nation based on self-reliant family farms to an interdependent urban society has added complications that have an impact on the issues of hunger and obesity as well.

A "typical" obese family in the United States could be described two parents with four children, two girls, ages five and seventeen, and two boys, ages eleven and thirteen. The family eats out two to three times a month with an average income. Their shelves are never empty, sometimes a little bare, but prepackaged foods are always around. Prepackaged foods today, especially, are a quick fix to a busy schedule; they also help moms and dads with dinner when they have just worked a hard eight-hour day. The prepackaged foods offer help to our busy lives but offer harmful foods to our bodies.

A "typical" hungry family in the United States could be described as two parents or more commonly one parent with five children, three boys, ages seven, eleven, and thirteen, and two girls, ages five and seventeen. The family has a lower income with one more child so they eat out less--one to two times a month. The best meals they have are around the holidays, when they might receive gift baskets from churches or charitable community agencies.

One thing these two families have in common is their children. Here is one statistic that should be a concern for our first family described. "Health experts predict that if the trend of obesity is not reversed, that today's children will be the first generation in decades not to live as long as their parents." We have this statistic today because our poor choices on balancing good nutrition with healthy physical activity. Part of the reason why we do not have daily, healthy physical activity like we should is because of technology. Today when a child comes home from school they watch television or play their game cube, rather than playing out doors.

But, not all children are obese. There are more than a few that are not getting enough to eat, like our second family. "More than one in 10 households experience food insecurity. In 2001 a total of 33 million Americans, including 13 million children, were not always sure when or where they would get their next meal." Sometimes finding a healthy meal is hard because the parents' incomes are not adequate enough to fulfill the family's needs. When the mother of the second family goes to the store to buy flour she has to buy white flour because it is cheaper, when she knows whole grain flour is more nutritious. Or she may purchase white bread instead of whole wheat bread. We also must consider that when money is tight it is easier to go to a fast food restaurant, just because the food is cheaper. These are some reasons on why hunger and obesity coexist.

To help our children not become another statistic we need to teach them about nutrition. We need to set good habits and model those habits. It is always easier to make a habit rather than break a habit. Both of these families have an education. But, one thing they are lacking in their education is information on nutrition. Even our second family needs to know more about nutrition because those with insufficient resources to purchase adequate food can still be overweight, as stated in the previous paragraph. Recent work from Cornell University and the University of California suggest that obesity among poor women may be linked to their habit of periodically going without food so that their children can eat. Since there has been a lack of nutritional education, "The sixth edition of Dietary Guidelines for Americans places stronger emphasis on reducing calorie consumption and increasing physical activity. This joint project of the Departments of Health and Human services and Agriculture is the latest of the five-year reviews required by federal law. It is the basis of federal food programs and nutrition education programs and supports the nutrition and physical fitness pillars of President Bush's Healthier US Initiative." In the next few paragraphs we will hear of some new nutritional information.

Most of the new nutritional information coming out is about the new food pyramids. There is the Mayo Clinic Healthy Weight Pyramid and the My Pyramid Steps To A Healthier You. My Pyramid even offers some ways to balance between food and Physical activity. These ways are . . .

- Be sure to stay within your daily calorie needs.
- Be physically active for at least 30 minutes a day
- 60 minutes a day of physical activity may be needed to prevent weight gain.
- For sustaining weight loss, at least 60 to 90 minutes a day of physical activity may be required.
- Children and teenagers should be physically active for 60 minutes everyday

The more we learn about nutrition the more things we need to pass on. So that we can set new trends and our children can pass these new trends on to make a healthier, happier world.

Without having an education on nutrition there are still ways to help eliminate the coexisting hunger and obesity. And both obesity and hunger/food insecurity require solutions that include regular access to nutritionally adequate food. Federal nutrition programs provide access to food, and, when working properly, they can help families achieve food security. It has been shown that these four major federal nutrition programs improve nutrition:

- Food Stamp Program - This is the largest nutrition program for poor households. This program only provides 79 cents per person per meal, on average. This is because benefits are so low, and because food stamp households have such low incomes. This puts the family precisely in the situation facing cycles of food availability and then restriction.

- School Lunch and Breakfast Programs - Some schools may call this program a free and reduced lunch. All schools offer healthy and less expensive meals to all students because they are federally funded. Students from families with low incomes can qualify for either reduced lunch prices or free lunches. The second family I talked about would qualify for free and reduced lunches. This program offers healthful meals with a variety of foods and appropriate portion sizes. The schools have to serve meals that are in compliance with the US Dietary Guidelines for fat and saturated fat. If children in school get less nutritious foods, that food is likely to have come from vending machines, a la carte lines, or the lack of time, space, and long lines.

- WIC - WIC stands for (the special supplemental nutrition program for Women,

Infants, and Children. This program provides food packages that will supplement the diets of low-income women, infants, and children with key nutrients, which they are lacking in their diet. One thing I like about WIC is they also offer nutrition education to the family.

- Child and Adult Care Food Program - (CACFP) provides nutritious meals and snacks to children in childcare programs. Research has shown that children who receive CACFP meals and snacks have higher nutrient levels, and consume more servings of milk and vegetables, and fewer servings of fats and sweets, than children in child care programs that do not participate in the program.

If you are obese or have hunger/food insecurity and do not take part in any of these programs or any others that could help, your body is at risk. Obesity is a risk factor for heart disease, diabetes, several types of cancer, and other chronic health problems. It also is associated with premature death and disability, increased health care costs, and lost productivity. While hunger and food insecurity impair health, status, making people less likely to resist illness and more likely to become sick or hospitalized. Having hunger/food insecurity can also cause you to gain weight. This is one-way hunger and obesity coexist. Obesity can be an adaptive response to periods when people are unable to get enough to eat. Research indicates that chronic ups and downs in food availability can cause people to eat more, when food is available, than they normally would. Also the body can compensate for periodic food storages by becoming more efficient at storing more calories as fat.

So, in conclusion society is changing with technology and the economy, but not always for the better. We are becoming less physically fit because of it. Most people do less physical labor and more work at their desks and computers. Our problem is we still eat like we just did a day of farming when the truth is we have barely done anything physical. Society thinks this is ok but they are not educated enough to know research says we are going in the wrong direction. When people in the United States, a nation that is looked up to as a world leader, have basic health issues, it is hard to stay strong as a nation. With world peace becoming even more necessary in a world becoming more connected to technology, good health becomes a basic building block for peace. When people have their needs met the world is a more stable place to live. I will close with a poem, written by Michael Carey, that shows the relationship between world peace and good health.

"On The Relationship between Food and Peace"

You cannot carry peace
on shoulders that are weak,
with bones that are bent
or a stomach that is crying

You cannot
shake a hand
with a hand
you cannot lift,
but you can
make a fist

What you don't feed
will never grow
will never love
will never be strong enough
to hold or save you

