



The Mental Effects of Hunger

By Emerson Johnston

Ancel Keys, an early researcher for Obesity, once wrote. "The history of man is in large part the chronicle of his quest for food."

Many people find the contrasting epidemics of Obesity and Hunger to contradict each other in such a way that both have become topics that aren't of much relevance to our current policy makers in light of more pressing issues. No longer can we stand by as we learn of the effects that the latter can have on people of any age and the reasons why we don't have the resources to stop the epidemic as it continues to grow.

According to Dr. John Butterly and Jack Shepard, authors of the new book *Hunger: The Biology and Politics of Starvation*, almost 15% of all households do not have enough to eat daily and suffer from recurring hunger. That amounts to over 1.02 billion families living their lives without the assurance of food. What is more alarming is not the number of people but the way it affects them, something which is better shown through an experiment conducted by Ancel Keys in the early 1950s.

Keys conducted an experiment with a pool of over 30 conscientious objector volunteers. These men and women, by participating in the experiment, would willingly restrict their food intake substantially for several months for the sole purpose of providing detailed information on the psychological and physiological effects of caloric restriction. The experiment, called the "Minnesota semi-starvation experiment," documented the results in an enormous two-volume tome. The semi-starvation was meant to pose the least possible harm to the participants of the experiment as the participants were provided with comfortable living conditions, warm clothing, and under no threat of attack.

Over the course of the experiment, the men were to lose about 25% of their weight by caloric restriction and exercise and then spend three months in rehabilitation. Humans can tolerate a weight loss of up to "10% of their weight without much functional disorganization" according to an article written for *Psychology Today* in early 2011. This drastic loss in weight, though carefully monitored, brought forward a plethora of results that when revealed showed the real harms of having too little to eat.

Throughout the experiment, Keys' subjects became totally preoccupied with food. Often, they would spend hours on end thinking over their meals. They developed "striking changes" to both their physical and mental appearances that only became more apparent as the experiment continued. The men soon became depressed, listless, unable to concentrate, socially withdrawn, and apathetic. At the turn of the second month of the experiment the men and women became less concerned with their hygiene, neglecting to comb their hair, brush their teeth, and in some cases, even shower. Keys called the syndrome "semistarvation neurosis," and the effects it's had on some of the participants lasted longer than the 3 month rehabilitation period provided to them at the end of the experiment.

What is important to take away from here is the ages of the participants. These men and women ranged from early 20s to late 30s, but all showed drastic changes in both their physical and mental selves. The fact more alarming than the effects of hunger is the fact of who it's affecting. According Feeding America, almost 1 in 6 children will not know where their next meal will come from. It doesn't take a genius to know that if the effects of hunger on an adult are bad, the same conditions being brought upon a child could be fatal.