This audio documentary aims to shed light upon the difficulty of maintaining a healthy lifestyle. It becomes even harder when the circumstances around you do not help in achieving this goal. The streets of Egypt unfortunately are not the most accommodating of places to healthy living, and thus play a key role in hindering attempts of it.

_MUSIC: FADE IN: “Sheep Clouds” by Lobo Loco (00:00 – 02:20 seconds)_

_SFX: FADE IN: Gymnasium sound and basketball players (:11)_

The all too familiar sound of exercising at the gym. We’ve all been there, done that. But we never really stop to think about what got us there.

_SFX: FADE OUT: Gymnasium sound and basketball players_

_NAT SOUND: FADE IN: Sound of family in the kitchen cooking, and plates clatter (:11)_

_ENGY ABOELNOUR (EA): “When you want to eat healthy, and then they cook stuff that’s not healthy, and yeah the diet just goes somewhere else.” (:8)_

_NAT SOUND: FADE OUT: Sound of family in the kitchen cooking, and plates clatter_

That’s Engy Aboelnour, a 22-year-old college senior struggling with her weight. Like many Egyptians her age, Engy has been exposed to the tempting dishes of Egyptian cuisine, and the not so healthy lifestyle Egyptians follow in general.

_MARWA HUSSEIN (MH): “The best thing for the mother is to try and reduce criticism and just promote awareness of healthy eating as much as she can. Parents in general: parents both mothers and fathers.” (:11)_

Professor Marwa Hussein, professor of psychology and counselor at the Student Counseling Center at AUC, explains how the cases of obesity she deals with are usually affected by their
families and the culture.

ABDELRAHMAN ELSAYED (AE): I don’t know how to eat healthy and so on; I didn’t have any health awareness. My family didn’t care about that, they just said you have to lose weight, but they didn’t say how and they didn’t help me. (:10)

Abdelrahman was able to find a way out of his weight gain.

AE: “I started to read about nutrition, about work out.” (:04)

But it wasn’t Abdelrahman alone. Apparently everyone knows the solution to the problem of obesity.

MH: “And I think exercising now again, the high middle class they are exercising everywhere.” (:05)

EA: “I try, when I get the time, I go to the club or something.” (:03)

Unfortunately, Egypt doesn’t really encourage people to move. It’s hard to get out and try to jog in the street, except in some rare neighborhoods.

NAT SOUND: FADE IN: Sound of street traffic (:25)

EA: “Here in Egypt people don’t let you walk in the streets freely, and we don’t have bike lanes. We have a lot of traffic and cars and things like that. (:13)

NAT SOUND: FADE OUT: Sound of street traffic

Yes, it’s also hard to come across bike lanes as well. They’re very few in the streets of Egypt, and to add to the dilemma, they’re even sometimes used as parking spaces.

MUSIC: FADE OUT: “Sheep Clouds” by Lobo Loco

SFX: FADE IN: Children playing (:09)

AE: “If it’s possible we can teach them in school how to eat healthy, and how important it is to work out; not just it’s a P.E class so we go play football and so on. I think it’s related to health and eating disorder” (:14)

SFX: FADE IN: Children playing

MUSIC: FADE IN: “Yegah Sirto” by Ehl-i-Keyf (00:00 – 01:43 seconds)
Okay hold on, let’s slow down a bit. Better yet, let’s look at the root of the problem. From the streets, to the culture, people are constantly torn between being healthy and having to live by the rules of Egypt. Throughout history, Egyptian cuisine has been an important part of people’s culture. Even ancient Egyptians have left wall paintings and carvings showing huge feasts as evidence of their love for food. Some of the major foods that make up the Egyptian cuisine are bread, rice, and vegetables.

MH: “Our eating habits are very unhealthy. The eating contents are very unhealthy. I think the Egyptian cuisine is filled up with a lot of processed food in general.” (:13)

EA: “Here in Egypt, people usually cook with butter and stuff. And they put the rice and potatoes together, and they don’t have healthy options. And these things are just fattening. Also, we have a lot of fast food outlets, and all of these things are contributions to the weight gain.” (:25)

While the food itself may not be unhealthy, since it does include a lot of vegetables, the way Egyptians cook their food, as Engy explained, is what leads to weight gain. This takes us back to our initial problem of how to deal with obesity in the Egyptian society. People like Engy and Abdelrahman are affected greatly by their opportunities for exercising, or actually the lack of it.

AE: “I usually jog or ride a bike in the morning, about 4, 5, 6 in the morning so mostly the street is not full of people” (:10)

MUSIC: FADE OUT: “Yegah Sirto” by Ehl-i-Keyf

MUSIC: FADE IN: “Time We Don’t Have” by Au7um (00:00 – 01:54 seconds)

In a country where exercising in the street is a security risk, going to the gym isn’t always the option. Registering in a gym is actually considered a luxury for most of the population. As for the rest, when the decision is made to exercise in the street, they’re faced with poor infrastructure and harassment.

MH: “I think the well-educated class in general, they are members in gyms and they can do that within where they are living.” (:10)
“But only the high middle class, not the other socio-economic class?”

MH: “Yes, and probably the middle class as well, middle class in general. Even the low middle class, they are still quite knowledgeable about these habits and they are trying to maintain healthy habits.” (:11)

According to a clinical study titled Social Factors Associated with Adult Obesity, the neighborhood one lives in can influence the possibility of developing obesity, since it influences their behavioral norms, access to food, and opportunities for physical activity. This is reflected in the social divisions found in Egypt; which are based on the individual’s monthly income and restrict exercising opportunities. It also affects people mentally.

EA: “It doesn’t feel good. Um, no it feels really bad. I mean when you go to a store and you can’t find your size, or you find your size but it doesn’t look good, or your friends making fun of you or your parents telling you ‘you have to lose weight’ doesn’t feel that good.” (:20)

While Engy is still suffering from the fact that she sometimes can’t control her weight gain, Abdelrahman recalls how he felt when he was obese.

AE: “Depressed, disappointed, low self-esteem, kind of hated my life, and wished for a way out.” (:09)

MUSIC: FADE OUT: “Time We Don’t Have” by Au7um

MUSIC: FADE IN: “Somewhere Only We Know” by Simply Three (00:00 – 02:00 seconds)

Statistics issued for the year 2010 by the World Health Organization showed that Egypt was the 14th fattest country in Africa, with 70 percent of its adult population overweight or obese. The most recent statistics conducted by the Egyptian Ministry of Health and Population in 2015 shows almost 76 percent of men surveyed were obese, while about 90 percent of women surveyed were obese.

SFX: FADE IN: Feet stomping (:15)

AE: “I decided with one of my two friends to found a team, it’s called SWAT:
Street Workout the Art of Transformation, to help people transform. Not just physically, but mentally and spiritually.” (:15)

SFX: FADE OUT: Feet stomping

EA: “I plan on changing my lifestyle. I’m waiting to graduate, and I’m planning to change my lifestyle afterwards. I want to eat healthy, I want to exercise, not for the fact that I want to lose weight but just for my health.” (:18)

Initiatives have been on the growth recently. Like Abdelrahman’s SWAT team, initiatives like Cairo Runners, The Fitness Grind, and others trying to improve infrastructure in Egypt are on the rise. They are trying to change conditions in order to raise awareness about maintaining healthy lifestyles. Is obesity then a coincidence? We can beg to differ.

This audio documentary was produced by Norhan Amin for the Audio Production course at the American University in Cairo taught by Professor Kim Fox in Spring 2017. Special thanks to Engy Aboelnour, Abdelrahman Elsayed, and Professor Marwa Hussein for their interviews. Credits for music in order of appearance go, “Sheep Clouds” by Lobo Loco, “Yegah Sirto” by Ehl-i-Keyf, “Time We Don’t Have” by Au7um, and “Somewhere Only We Know” by Simply Three. NAT sound of street traffic and kitchen noise were collected by Norhan Amin. Sound effects of gymnasium, children playing, and feet stomps from YouTube.

MUSIC: FADE OUT: “Somewhere Only We Know” by Simply Three