



Delta Gamma Well Aware

Encompasses eight dimensions: Social, Spiritual, Physical, Emotional, Vocational, Intellectual, Financial and Leadership Development

Women and Body Image

National Eating Disorders Awareness Week is February 24-March 1, 2008. Many girls and women struggle with serious eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. However, women who are not diagnosed with an eating disorder may still struggle with negative body image and poor body satisfaction that can lead to unhealthy thoughts and behaviors.

Body image is a combination of both the external, objective physical attributes of appearance [what others actually see] as well as the internal, subjective representations of the body [what you think of your body and your physical appearance] and the way in which it is experienced (Cash & Pruzinsky, 1990). Body image is a complicated construct that can be influenced and shaped by many factors. These factors can either enhance or take away from the formation of a positive body image. As body image continues to develop over time, the individual can experience different levels of body satisfaction or body esteem. Body satisfaction is described as satisfaction with particular parts of the body (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). Satisfaction can vary among people and can vary for the same person over time. Some people form a negative body image and experience low body satisfaction and show this through **concerns about weight, displeasure with particular parts of the body, or attempts to change the body through diet or exercise.**

Although both men and women experience body concerns, women are more likely to experience body image concerns than men. Unfortunately, this negative body image and body dissatisfaction are widespread among women. Cash, Winstead, and Janda (1986) found that only 7% of women expressed little concern with their bodies. The other **93% of the women in the study expressed concern with the way in which their bodies looked.** This concern with one's weight and body is so prevalent among women that it can be considered a normal part of a woman's life (Rodin, Silberstein, and Striegel-Moore, 1985). Experts in the field use the term "normative discontent" to describe the extremely common dissatisfaction that women express about their bodies.

Not only is negative body image a "normative discontent" among adult women, but studies show that this discontent is apparent in almost all age groups of girls, young women, and adult women. These concerns are present for females across the lifespan. A study of normal weight and obese females in grades 4-12 shows that one third of young females report behaviors and attitudes that are evidence of body concerns (Mellin, 1988). **These girls show restrained eating, fear of fat, distortion of body image, binge eating, and purging as early as age nine.** In addition, studies of older adolescent girls show that **70% of girls over the age of 15 want to lose weight or are currently engaging in dieting behaviors** (Wadden, Foster, Stunkard & Linowitz, 1989). As these studies show, for women, these concerns and

preoccupation with weight and dieting begin in childhood and continue throughout adolescence and adulthood.

The prevalence of negative body image is especially problematic because studies have shown a relationship between negative body image and serious mental and physical health problems. **Studies have shown that body dissatisfaction is associated with an increased risk for the development of eating disorders and depression** (Stice & Whitenton, 2002). Although negative body image increases the risk for serious psychological disorders, many women experience body concerns and are never clinically diagnosed with a disorder. However, **negative body image is problematic for these women because it also increases the incidence of dangerous dieting behaviors and the development of negative overall self image** (Cash & Henry, 1995). Negative body image is so widespread that it is considered “normative,” but clearly normal does not have the common connotation of adaptive or healthy in this case. Women of all ages experience body concerns that can increase their risk for serious psychological disorders as well as sub-clinical, but still unhealthy, behaviors and attitudes.

Many factors can contribute to a negative body image and unhealthy thoughts and behaviors for women. The research examples below demonstrate how parents, peers, and the media influence the body satisfaction and dieting behaviors of girls and women.

The messages girls receive from their **parents** about weight and dieting can contribute to the development of a negative body image for young women.

- Moderate body dissatisfaction and weight-loss attempts in adolescent girls are related to mothers' encouragement to lose weight (Benedikt, Wertheim, and Love, 1998).
- Extreme body dissatisfaction and weight-loss attempts in adolescent girls are related to mothers' own body dissatisfaction and the mothers' use of extreme weight loss behaviors such as fasting, crash dieting, and skipping meals.
- There is a significant correlation between the degree of dietary restriction of mothers and their daughters (Hill, Weaver, and Blundell, 1990).

The messages from **peers** about body image, weight, and dieting are important for girls and women.

- Girls who report more frequent comparison with peers experience higher levels of body dissatisfaction (Jones, 2002).
- Perceived pressure from peers to be thin predicts increases in body dissatisfaction (Stice and Whitenton, 2002).
- Girls and women who feel direct pressure from peers to be thin or to lose weight are more dissatisfied with their bodies and their body weight.
- Adolescent girls that report higher levels of teasing about their bodies also report higher levels of body dissatisfaction, eating disturbance, depression, and lower self-esteem.

There has been extensive research on the relationship between the **media** and body image, and most studies show that the media plays a role in promoting the thin ideal and exposing girls to this message.

- Drive for thinness and disturbed patterns of eating in adolescent girls are strongly correlated with reading magazines that contain information and ideas about body shape and weight management (Levine, Smolak, and Hayden, 1994).
- Exposure to images of thin models is significantly related to higher levels of self-consciousness, body competence, and anxiety in college age females (Kalodner, 1997).

Women are exposed to messages from a variety of sources that contribute to feelings of body dissatisfaction and poor body image. **If you are struggling with body image concerns or have unhealthy eating or exercise habits that disrupt your daily life, you should seek help from a professional.** If you are concerned about a friend, encourage her to seek help. Many college campuses offer excellent resources and have the appropriate professionals available to assist students who are struggling with body image or eating disorders.

Resources

Learn more about National Eating Disorders Awareness week at www.nationaleatingdisorders.org

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