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Body Image



On the 7th April 2008, YACSA ran the YOUTHink Forum for young people across South Australia to discuss issues important to them. YACSA identified the issues of **bullying, media, social networking sites, body image, debt and the environment** for discussion.

Participants discussed the promotion of unrealistic body shapes in the media and the high emphasis put on appearance as opposed to other personal attributes, which is often a basis of discrimination for women in the workforce. They acknowledged the high numbers of women and increasing numbers of men experiencing problems regarding body image, and many of the participants themselves confessed to having negative body image. Advertising, family, friends, media, personal interests and lifestyles, as well as sports culture, were all identified as influences on young people's ideas of body image.

What is negative body image?

Although body image is a problem that affects a broad range of people, it is particularly prevalent amongst young people and can have negative affects and consequences.¹ Body image describes an individual's attitudes, feelings and thoughts towards their body, and includes their mental picture about the way they look.² Negative body image is most severe between the ages of 15 and 22 years, and despite rising trends amongst males, occurs more commonly in females. In the 2008 Australian Democrats Youth Poll, more than half of the respondents (54%) stated that they were concerned about their body image, with 45% of female respondents and 23% of male respondents believing that they were overweight when they actually fell within a healthy weight range.³

Myths of body image

Even though images of an objectified and unattainable female body image can contribute to psychological distress in women, it is also thought that current idealised images of the male body, such as being lean and muscular, can contribute to poor self-esteem and psychological conflict within males too. There is increasing evidence to suggest that males who suffer from negative body image can, as a result, also suffer from psychological and physical distress, and aggression.⁴ In recent years the prevalence of young men suffering from negative body image and eating disorders has increased.⁵ Drug and supplement use for improving strength and/or physical appearance has risen dramatically with a correlation between usage and a preoccupation with weight, negative body image, poorer health-related attitudes, and an increase in consumption of men's fitness and health magazines.⁶

Consequences of having negative body image

2% - 4% of the population has been diagnosed with an eating disorder, although other consequences of having a negative body image can include anxiety, feelings of worthlessness, irregular eating patterns, lower participation in physical activity, restrictive dieting behaviours, unintentional weight gain, or weight cycling.⁷

¹ YACVic 2004, *YACVic's submission to the Family and Community Development Committee's Inquiry into body image: negative body image and young GLBTI and disabled people*, Youth Affairs Council of Victoria Inc, Melbourne, p. 3

² Teal and Athelstone (1975) cited in YACVic 2004, *YACVic's submission to the Family and Community Development Committee's Inquiry into body image: negative body image and young GLBTI and disabled people*, Youth Affairs Council of Victoria Inc, Melbourne, p. 4

³ VicHealth 2004, *Parliamentary inquiry into issues relating to the development of body image among young people and associated effects on their health and wellbeing*, VicHealth, Australia, p. 1

⁴ Tager, D, Good, G.E and Morrison, J.B 2006, 'Our bodies, ourselves revisited: male body image and psychological well-being,' *International Journal of Men's Health*, vol. 5, no. 3, p. 229

⁵ Braun, Sunday, Huang and Halmi (1999) cited in Tager, D, Good, G.E and Morrison, J.B 2006, *Our bodies, ourselves revisited: male body image and psychological well-being*, *International Journal of Men's Health*, p. 229

⁶ Field *et al* (2005); Irving, Wall, Neumark-Sztainer and Story (2002); Smolak, Mumen and Thompson (2005) cited in Tager, D, Good, G.E and Morrison, J.B 2006, *Our bodies, ourselves revisited: male body image and psychological well-being*, *International Journal of Men's Health*, p. 229

⁷ Ibid.

Having poor self image can also result in depression, low self-esteem, poor health habits, sexual dysfunction, and an increased risk (as well as exacerbation) of certain psychiatric disorders. It can have a negative impact on personal behaviours and emotions, interpersonal relationships, and day-to-day living too.⁸

Why is body image important to young people?

For young people, body image is a fundamental part of constructing their own identity. The youth phase (thought to be between 12 and 25) of identity construction is considered to be particularly important even though identity is created and moulded throughout the whole lifespan.⁹ A young person's identity is particularly critical as they coordinate their lives, personal choices, belief system and culture around who they are as human beings and how they fit into the social world around them.¹⁰ Therefore a young person's evaluation of themselves, their worth as an individual and how they fit into 'their social world' is, in a sense, decided upon by their sense of their own identity.¹¹

Causes of negative body image

One of the suggest causes of negative body image is a socio-cultural pressure to adhere to a body image considered ideal by society.¹² Included in this socio-cultural pressure are influences from family members, peers, and especially the media.¹³ There is a lot of evidence to suggest and support that a link exists between the media depicting images that they think represent socio-cultural ideals of attractiveness, and negative body image and eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa.¹⁴ Body weight, consumerism, fashion retailers, health messages, health professionals, individual personality traits, peer influence, stigmatisation and the model industry have all been identified as being predictors of gaining a negative body image.¹⁵

Recommendations

The major issue participants wanted changed was the promotion of more natural body images across advertising and media. Some other recommendations from the YOUTHink forum were:

- Advocating for media education within all schools
- Supporting health promotion in schools (including healthy eating and appropriate exercise for different age groups)
- Promoting National Body Image and Eating Disorder Awareness Week
- Supporting the development of size-accepting cultures in the fashion, media and retail arenas

Further reading on Body Image:

Mudge, K n.d, 'Positive body image: a weight off my mind', Children, Youth and Women's Health Service, South Australia, available from http://www.cyh.com/HealthTopics/Library/WOMM_bb.pdf

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⁸ Slade (1994) cited in YACVic 2004, *YACVic's submission to the Family and Community Development Committee's Inquiry into body image: negative body image and young GLBTI and disabled people*, Youth Affairs Council of Victoria Inc, Melbourne, p. 4

⁹ Erickson (1968) cited in YACVic 2004, *YACVic's submission to the Family and Community Development Committee's Inquiry into body image: negative body image and young GLBTI and disabled people*, Youth Affairs Council of Victoria Inc, Melbourne, p. 6

¹⁰ YACVic 2004, *YACVic's submission to the Family and Community Development Committee's Inquiry into body image: negative body image and young GLBTI and disabled people*, Youth Affairs Council of Victoria Inc, Melbourne, p. 6

¹¹ Daniels and Gabel (2004) cited in YACVic 2004, *YACVic's submission to the Family and Community Development Committee's Inquiry into body image: negative body image and young GLBTI and disabled people*, Youth Affairs Council of Victoria Inc, Melbourne, p. 6

¹² Neumark-Sztainer (2005); Smolak and Streigel-Moore (2001) cited in Watson, R and Vaughn, L.M 2006, *Limiting the effects of the media on body image: does the length of a media intervention make a difference?* *Eating Disorders: The Journal of Treatment and Prevention*, America p. 386

¹³ Watson, R and Vaughn, L.M. 2006, 'Limiting the effects of the media on body image: does the length of a media literacy intervention make a difference?' *Eating Disorders: The Journal of Treatment and Prevention*, vol. 14, issue 5, p. 386

¹⁴ Stice, Schupak-Neuberg, Shaw and Stein, 1994, cited in Watson, R and Vaughn, L.M. 2006, 'Limiting the effects of the media on body image: does the length of a media literacy intervention make a difference?' *Eating Disorders: The Journal of Treatment and Prevention*, vol. 14, issue 5, pp. 386 – 387

¹⁵ VicHealth 2004, *Parliamentary inquiry into issues relating to the development of body image among young people and associated effects on their health and wellbeing*, VicHealth, Australia, p. 1