

The Media, Body Image and Eating Disorders

Eating disorders are complex conditions that arise from a variety of factors, including physical, psychological, interpersonal, and social issues. Media images that help to create cultural definitions of beauty and attractiveness are often acknowledged as being among those factors contributing to the rise of eating disorders.

Media messages screaming “thin is in” may not directly cause eating disorders, but they help to create the context within which people learn to place a value on the size and shape of their body. To the extent that media messages like advertising and celebrity spotlights help our culture define what is beautiful and what is “good,” the media’s power over our development of self-esteem and body image can be incredibly strong.

Some Basic Facts About the Media’s Influence in Our Lives:

- ★ The average US resident is exposed to approximately 5,000 advertising messages a day (Alfreiter, Elzinga & Gordon, 2003).
- ★ According to a recent survey of adolescent girls, their main source of information about women’s health issues comes from the media (Commonwealth Fund, 1997).
- ★ Researchers estimate that 60% of Caucasian middle school girls read at least one fashion magazine regularly (Levine, 1997).
- ★ Another study of mass media magazines discovered that women’s magazines had 10.5 times more advertisements and articles promoting weight loss than men’s magazines did (as cited in Guillen & Barr, 1994).
- ★ A study of one teen adolescent magazine over the course of 20 years found that in articles about fitness or exercise plans, 74% cited “to become more attractive” as a reason to start exercising and 51% noted the need to lose weight or burn calories (Guillen & Barr, 1994).
- ★ The average young adolescent watches 3-4 hours of TV per day (Levine, 1997).
- ★ A study of 4,294 network television commercials revealed that 1 out of every 3.8 commercials send some sort of “attractiveness message,” telling viewers what is or is not attractive (as cited in Myers et al., 1992). These researchers estimate that the average adolescent sees over 5,260 “attractiveness messages” per year.

Encouraging the media to present more diverse and real images of people with more positive messages about health and self-esteem may not eliminate eating disorders entirely, but it would help reduce the pressures many people feel to make their bodies conform to one ideal, and in the process, reduce feelings of body dissatisfaction and ultimately decrease the potential for eating disorders.

References:

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Tips for Becoming a Critical Viewer of the Media

Media messages about body shape and size will affect the way we feel about ourselves and our bodies only if we let them. One of the ways we can protect our self-esteem and body image from the media's often narrow definitions of beauty and acceptability is to become a critical viewer of the media messages we are bombarded with each day. When we effectively recognize and analyze the media messages that influence us, we remember that the media's definitions of beauty and success do not have to define our self-image or potential.

To be a Critical Viewer, remember:

- ★ All media images and messages are constructions. They are NOT reflections of reality. Advertisements and other media messages have been carefully crafted with an intent to send a very specific message.
- ★ Advertisements are created to do one thing: convince you to buy or support a specific product or service.
- ★ To convince you to buy a specific product or service, advertisers will often construct an emotional experience that looks like reality. Remember, you are only seeing what the advertisers want you to see.
- ★ Advertisers create their message based on what they *think* you will want to see and what they *think* will affect you and compel you to buy their product. Just because they *think* their approach will work with people like you doesn't mean it has to work with you as an individual.
- ★ As individuals, we decide how to experience the media messages we encounter. We can choose to use a filter that helps us understand what the advertiser wants us to think or believe and then choose whether we want to think or believe that message. We can choose a filter that protects our self-esteem and body image.

Help promote healthier body image messages in the media:

- ★ Talk back to the TV when you see an ad or hear a message that makes you feel bad about yourself or your body by promoting only thin body ideals.
- ★ Write a letter to an advertiser you think is sending positive, inspiring messages that recognize and celebrate the natural diversity of human body shapes and sizes. Compliment their courage to send positive, affirming messages.
- ★ Make a list of companies who consistently send negative body image messages and make a conscious effort to avoid buying their products. Write them a letter explaining why you are using your "buying power" to protest their messages. Tear out the pages of your magazines that contain advertisements or articles that glorify thinness or degrade people of larger sizes. Enjoy your magazine without negative media messages about your body.
- ★ Talk to your friends about media messages and the way they make you feel. Ask yourself, are you inadvertently reinforcing negative media messages through the ways you talk to yourself (and the mirror), the comments you make to children or friends, or the types of pictures you have on the refrigerator or around the office?

