

Friendship, Body Image and Dieting in Teenage Girls: A Research Report

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In Western society beauty and slimness march hand in hand. Although a relatively new fashion, it has a powerful grip, strengthened by the myth that slimness brings success and happiness. As this belief has grown, more and more young women have turned to extremes of thinness and dieting in search of solutions to unhappiness. But today's socio-cultural fashion favouring slimness as a beauty ideal may be thought of as being filtered to the individual through different channels, or sub-cultural influences. These sub-cultural factors may increase or reduce the pressure to strive for thinness.

Sub-cultural influences: Media, ethnicity and family

The sub-cultural influence that has received the majority of attention is the media. The media present a very narrow interpretation of beauty, and viewing these unobtainable images can reduce self-esteem and body satisfaction in healthy women. While few girls escape media presentation of beauty, there is some variation in degree of exposure to such images. Ethnicity may also mediate the impact of the "thin is beautiful" message. For example, while control and power are typically associated with slimness in Caucasian-American sub-cultures, strength and power may be associated with largeness in African-American sub-cultures, weakening the pressure for thinness in the latter group. A third mediating sub-cultural influence is the family environment. Mothers of today's teenagers grew up in a weight conscious world and the value placed on thinness by parents may be reflected in their communications with their daughters. Teenage girls are more likely to be dieting if their parents are dieting or encouraging their daughters to diet.

Friendship cliques

The world of most teenage girls, however, revolves around their friends. Girls map out their weekends and evenings at the mall in little huddles or on the phone. Within these friendship groups, girls express their attitudes and listen to those of their peers. These friendship networks, or cliques, are a vital part of the social world of most teenage girls. The importance of these networks has been recognized in research examining health-risk behaviours such as smoking, alcohol and drug use. But surprisingly, there has been very little examination of friendships and body image and dieting behaviours. Thus, in our recent research, we examined the role of friendship groups and friendship concerns in these attitudes and behaviours.

Specific aims of our research

The first aim of our research was to see whether some friendship groups were more concerned about body-image issues and dieting than others. If this was the case, we then wanted to understand more about the groups high and low in these concerns. What features did they have in common? Finally, we wanted to know how friendship issues impacted on an individual's own body image and dieting behaviours.

Study methods

We explored these questions with 520 Grade 10 girls (average age 15.5 years) in Melbourne, Australia, a city quite similar to Toronto. We asked each girl to write down the names of their best friends and, if she was part of a group, the names of the girls in her group. Using a computer program we identified members of friendship groups or cliques. We also obtained a wide variety of information about each girl's friendships: how happy she was with her friendships; how important being thin was to her group; how often her friends talked about body-size and losing weight; how often she compared her body to that of others, etc. In addition, we obtained information about the girl's own satisfaction with her body, dieting behaviours, use of extreme methods to lose weight, binge-eating, depression, self-esteem and perceptions of family support.

Friends share body image attitudes and dieting behaviours

Our study showed that members of friendship cliques do share body image attitudes, and are similar in their levels of dieting and use of extreme weight loss behaviours. Friendship groups thus may be characterized according to whether clique members typically have low body image and are dieting or not. We thought that this might be due to some friendship cliques containing bigger girls than others. While it was true that some groups were on the whole bigger than others, this did not account for the poorer body image and greater dieting of some friendship cliques compared to others. In normal weight individuals, depression has been associated with poorer body image, so we also considered that some groups may contain depressed members. Again, while some groups were on the whole more depressed than others, this did not explain the group differences in body-image satisfaction and use of extreme weight loss strategies.

Binge-eating is an individual behaviour

Interestingly, it seems that friends do not share binge-eating behaviours. Possibly a reason for this is that binge-eating is something often done privately, and often associated

with shame and thus not discussed. Consequently, other members of a friendship clique may not be aware of the binge-eating of an individual friend.

Low body-image cliques talk more about dieting

Having found that friendship cliques varied on body dissatisfaction and dieting, we wondered what features of the group might be associated with high and low body dissatisfaction and dieting. We found that groups high on body dissatisfaction and dieting had lower self-esteem, were more likely to talk about weight and dieting, valued thinness more highly, felt more influenced by others to diet, and made comparisons regarding their own body with that of others. Therefore, it appears that some friendship groups provide an environment, or sub-culture, in which being thin is highly valued. There is much discussion about dieting strategies and comparison between members on body shape issues within some groups and not others. We are yet to explore whether cliques involved in different activities (e.g., sport) are likely to have a particular level of body satisfaction and dieting, although we do know that cliques who are dating are neither more nor less likely to have body-image problems than those who are not.

Friends' attitudes are related to individual attitudes and behaviour

Our study supported previous findings that girls who are bigger than average, those who are more depressed, and those who feel pressure from their parents to be thinner were more likely to be dissatisfied with their bodies and to be dieting. However in addition, perceptions of friends' behaviour and comparison with friends were important predictors of these factors. The more friends were believed to be dieting and were a source of dieting information, the more likely a girl was to have low body image and be trying to lose weight. The more frequently a girl compared her body to those of others, the more weight and shape concerned she was likely to be. The greater the actual use of extreme weight control strategies of a girl's friends, the greater the likelihood she too would use these methods. It is of interest that our data generally did not indicate that girls in high body dissatisfaction groups were any less satisfied with their friends, or felt less accepted by them.

Implications of findings

Our research suggests that the friendship clique is an important sub-cultural environment for an individual teenage girl, and there seems to be a very close relationship between a girl's body image and dieting behaviours and those of her friends. It is likely that this

sub-culture reinforces particular weight related attitudes. In some sub-cultures thinness may not be so highly valued, relieving pressure on individuals to conform to unrealistic body shape expectations, while in others the reverse may be true. It has often been assumed that girls are influenced to become more like their friends (“peer pressure”), perhaps in order to be accepted, but it is also possible that girls choose friends who have similar attitudes as themselves. Our data do not tell us which of these mechanisms is occurring, but it is likely that both processes operate to some extent.

It is as yet unclear whether a girl within a clique with a high body-image concern is at greater risk of developing an eating disorder than those in less concern groups. It is likely, however, that a girl who is unhappy for any reason may be more likely to believe that the solution to unhappiness may be found in losing weight, if thinness is highly valued within her friendship group. On the other hand, vulnerable girls may gain protection in a friendship sub-culture which de-emphasizes weight issues. Treatment providers for disordered eating have long recognized the importance of addressing the family sub-culture. In order to provide a more positive environment for recovery for those with eating problems, an integration of the friendship clique into the treatment intervention where possible may also be very valuable.

The most successful prevention intervention programs for smoking and alcohol consumption are those which have used peer influence in a constructive way. Our research indicates that similar approaches may be valuable in increasing body satisfaction and decreasing the use of unhealthy weight-loss strategies in teenage girls. It may be valuable to target the friendship clique for intervention, rather than the individual. Our research suggests intervention material should be mindful of the power of the friendship sub-culture and raise awareness of the mutual support a friendship clique can provide for its members.

Suggested reading

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Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge the contributions of my co-workers, Dr. Eleanor Wertheim, Sharryn Muir and Helena Schutz, and the financial support of the Australian Rotary Health Research Fund.

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