

From Awareness to Prevention - Developing Solutions Through Media Literacy

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This year's Eating Disorder Awareness Week wrapped up with a fascinating one-day conference called Moving Forward With Prevention and Intervention, featuring a variety of speakers addressing a range of body image issues. Keynote speaker Michael Levine, professor of psychology at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio and a specialist in eating disorders, kicked off the day with an insightful discussion on the meaning of positive and negative body image and what we can do personally, professionally and politically to promote healthier body images.

In a humorous, sometimes self-deprecating talk, Levine referred to the cultural fascination with eating disorders in North America that leads people to be intrigued by his area of expertise. His words struck a chord with me. I decided to become a NEDIC volunteer because of my own insatiable interest in body image issues, my personal struggles with body image and my desire to find out how my profession (public relations and marketing) contributes to the problem.

Preventing eating disorders

Levine acknowledged that eating disorders are not limited to females, demonstrating through visuals that men are also bombarded with images of unattainable, Adonis-like ideals and noting that from 1973 to 1990, *Playgirl* centrefolds have 12 pounds less fat and 27 pounds more muscle. However, he stressed that there is an unbelievable prejudice in North America against heavier women and challenged us to explore what it means to be part of a culture that finds negativity in three milestones in female development—puberty, childbirth and menopause—just because they usually result in fat accumulation. He also attacked the term “negative body image” as a pathetic description that doesn't begin to capture the pain and anguish people experience in a society where style and expression are considered more important than substance.

Although we can only benefit when cultural fascination with distorted images translates into increased awareness, Levine is quick to point out that changing people's knowledge doesn't necessarily change their behaviours and the answers lie in prevention. In this theme, he suggested we look at the Four C's of prevention:

- **Consciousness-raising** - promoting discussion and increasing awareness of the issues
- **Competence** - cultivating the skills necessary to address the issues
- **Connection** - understanding the world and the roles these issues play in it
- **Change** - creating community-based advocacy programs to change the environment.

Media literacy and media impact on body image: Go Girls!

Levine explored these components in various seminars throughout the day, including a session on “Go Girls” (Giving Our Girls Inspiration and Resources for Lasting Self-esteem), a program he developed with Dr. Niva Piran, professor, Program in Community Development and Counselling Psychology at the University of Toronto.

The program is designed to develop media literacy and advocacy skills as well as a positive self and body image among high school girls. It is based on the theory that girls negotiate relationships with the women they see in magazine advertisements. By internalizing these images and wanting to achieve them, they disrupt their connections with their own and others’ real bodies.

Girls’ consumer role

A program designed for young girls is especially pertinent given their increasing consumer role. Due to a worldwide “girl power” phenomenon, an unprecedented amount of marketing is targeted at 11-to-14-year-olds, a demographic reputed to have \$700 million (CDN) in discretionary income according to Media Watch Canada. Marketing targeted towards girls is full of destructive mixed messages that encourage them to covet the looks of the narrow contemporary beauty ideal while hating girls who achieve it. This is demonstrated in an advertisement for a popular hair colouring product with a tagline that reads, “Four out of five girls you hate ask for it by name.”

As avid consumers of a variety of media, young girls often experience dissatisfaction with themselves in comparison to what they see in magazines and on television. Highly influential, they are ideal “agents of change” and responded positively to the “Go Girls” program.

Piran maintains that the program accepts that mass media is part of the daily lives of young girls and aims to teach “skepticism and understanding but not cynicism.” “Ideally, we will be able to help the girls challenge their internalization of ideals and social comparison while increasing their confidence and empowerment,” she says.

Media literacy features prominently in the “Go Girls” program and is an important consideration for anyone striving to learn more about body image issues. According to Levine, Canada is famous for its progressive stance in media literacy and Canadians have an increased attention, appreciation for and enjoyment of media, are more aware of its content and intentions and are knowledgeable about production techniques. However, even the most media-savvy citizens are surprised by what takes place in the name of selling beauty.

Fixing 'flawed' bodies

During the “Go Girls” session, Levine and Piran aired a video of the Joan Lunden program, *Behind Closed Doors* titled Manipulation of the Body. In this episode, Lunden went behind the scenes to uncover what goes into a fashion magazine photo shoot. The program revealed the lengthy and expensive process involved in creating the idealized and unattainable images of beauty women are subjected to, a process that involves everything from cinching clothing together with a staple gun to create the illusion of a smaller waist, to using a computerized eraser to slice an inch from a model’s “too fat” thigh.

All of this manipulation was performed on “supermodels,” women who seemingly already fit the beauty ideal but apparently are not good enough for the fashion industry. The most disturbing element was the cavalier way in which fashion industry professionals referred to the models, describing their bodies as commodities ready to be reshaped and repackaged for the marketplace.

Even to the media-literate audience at the session, the program generated reactions of surprise, disappointment and incredulity. In a follow-up discussion, many participants noted the complete disregard for the humanity of the models and the almost violent approach to “fixing” their “flawed bodies.” One participant expressed sadness with the scene in which a computer operator uses an on-screen eraser to reduce the size of model’s thigh in just seconds noting that millions of women will seek to achieve this unreal look which isn’t even possible for the thinnest of models. As Piran pointed out, “No one can look like the images in the magazines, not even the models themselves.”

Go Girls! Topics and extension areas

The “Go Girls” program can be used as part of an existing curriculum or as an extracurricular activity and consists of 12 group meetings, one hour, once a week. Over the course of three months, the students cover three main areas:

- **Media literacy** - learning to analyze messages critically and create their own messages
- **Media activism** - changing media through protest or praise
- **Media advocacy** - using the media to communicate messages in an attempt to change their environment.

Levine and Piran conducted a pilot project with 162 girls in five states, most of whom were between the ages of 16 and 18 and a control group of 90 other girls. The girls went through four topic areas:

1. Introduction to the challenges girls experience in the areas of body shape

Discussion of the many challenges young girls experience in the areas of body shape as they come to terms with the beauty ideal (white, young, slender, tall) and what it represents (success in all its forms).

2. Learning to be critical viewers of media messages and getting familiar with advertising tactics

Upon viewing the *Behind Closed Doors* program, one participant said, “After learning of the pinned clothes and computer animations, I realized how unrealistic it was to want to look like something that has been made to look perfect.” Another said that Go Girls “cut back personally a lot of the power that the media had over the way I see things.”

3. Planning and execution of activism and media advocacy

Girls in the pilot project collaborated to publicly protest the size of mannequins at several large department stores and successfully used local media to deliver their messages. They also created their own videos for peer awareness campaigns. “I now know how to reach the media through phone calls, letters and in person,” enthused one participant, “I don’t just have a small voice.”

4. Debriefing following implementation

Compared to the control group, Go Girls participants were found to have a reduced internalization of the slender ideal conveyed by media, reduced desire for thinness, increased self-acceptance and a greater sense of empowerment.

After attending the conference, my cultural fascination with body image remains intact but I am now also fascinated with the concept of media literacy. For me, the sessions really drove home the need to take the time to question the images I’m surrounded by in the media and to ponder the motivation behind them.

Like many, I’m learning this as an adult, but programs like Go Girls teach young women to question and critically analyze media at an early age, and give them the tools to become informed consumers of media well into adulthood. And in doing so, they make significant inroads towards prevention.

Principles of Prevention

- Health at any size focuses on healthy lifestyles, benefits all and harms none.
- Prevention is an attitude not a program.
- Prevention is for and by everyone.
- It can be simple and inexpensive.

Prevention Strategies

Primary:

- Individually, we can challenge our own beliefs about food and weight and base our own self-worth on more than just appearance.
- Be a healthy lifestyle role model.
- Community based intervention can include education across the lifespan to increase size acceptance.
- Speak out and write letters in an effort to minimize the social pressures to be thin.
- Applaud programs that show healthy and diverse images.
- Develop healthy institutions through policy initiatives.

Secondary:

- Encourage early detection and intervention by family and institutions for those at risk.
- Develop community-based programs that affirm individuals on bases of capacity, not appearance.
- Lobby for resources that focus on early intervention.

Tertiary:

- Encourage individuals to view recovery as an ongoing process.
- Increase quality of life.
- Support healthy choices that individuals make.
- Provide support groups and the promotion of life skills.
- Lobby for increases in appropriate support services.

What Can Be Done Right Now?

- Inform NEDIC of your programs, interventions and clinical availability so that we can provide referrals to these much needed resources.
- Investigate your own beliefs and learn more about how your clients perceive you.

Some Suggested Readings

Friedman, S. S. 1999. *Just for Girls: Facilitator's Manual*. Vancouver, BC: Salal Books. Available from Salal Communications, Ltd., 101-1184 Denman St. #309, Vancouver, BC V6G 2M9 Canada. (604-689-8399)

Friedman, S. S. 2000. *Nurturing GirlPower: Integrating Eating Disorder Prevention/Intervention Skills Into Your Practice*. Vancouver, BC: Salal Books. Available from Salal Communications, Ltd., 101-1184 Denman St. #309, Vancouver, BC V6G 2M9 Canada. (604-689-8399)

Levine, M. P., N. Piran and C. Stoddard. 1999. Mission more probable: Media literacy, activism, and advocacy in the prevention of eating disorders. In N. Piran, M. P. Levine, & C. Steiner-Adair (eds.), *Preventing Eating Disorders: A Handbook of Interventions and Special Challenges*. Philadelphia, PA: Brunner/Mazel, pp.3-25.

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