

## School Counsellors: Promoting Healthy Body Image amongst Adolescents

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### Abstract

This brief commentary will address the impact that body image has on female students' academic performance and self-worth. Body image dissatisfaction is a pervasive issue amongst teenagers. This commentary will emphasize the need for school counsellors to implement best practices that help to promote resilience and healthy body image amongst students, in order to help them be more academically and personally successful.

**Keywords:** Body image; Self-worth; School counsellor; Academic success

### Introduction

Body image has a profound impact on students' academic performance, as well as self-esteem. Many adolescents consistently make negative comments to themselves about their appearance and begin to internalize these self-destructive beliefs. Due to the fact that our culture places an exorbitantly high value on the ideal of perfection, this in turn impacts students' desire to align their appearance with society's sometimes unrealistic expectations of what people need to look like. Students who have a history of prolonged dieting, who were teased or bullied for their appearance, or who grew up in homes that place a high emphasis on having a thin physique are at greater risk of developing poor body images.

Additionally, due to the fact that we live in a media saturated world, mass media is significantly influential in regards to how people learn about body ideals, as well as attractiveness. According to the National Eating Disorders Association [1], over 80% of Americans watch television daily for several hours a day. Adolescents in particular utilize media on a consistent basis including social media, the Internet, and television, which has a direct impact on their body image. Cartoons, sitcoms, and images all emphasize the importance of attractiveness. Many advertisements are sexually objectified, which further exacerbates the desire for people; specifically teenagers to aspire to look like the models in the ads. There have been several studies conducted that have shown a correlation between thinness in mass media to body dissatisfaction and poor body image. Additionally, children who are exposed to mass media emphasizing the need for perfection early on are at a greater risk for struggling with body dissatisfaction as adolescents [1].

### Impact of Body Image on Academic Performance, Self-Efficacy, and Self-Esteem

Body image is a widespread concern that impacts both male and female adolescents [2]. Distorted body images can have a harmful effect on students' academic performance, self-worth, and overall school experience. Students with higher levels of body disturbance and eating disorders also were more likely to report having academic interference and lower grade point averages [3]. Research has shown

that there is a direct correlation between teenagers being negatively impacted by idealized body images glorified by the media.

Additionally, adolescent females were found to be more likely to be disengaged from school in comparison to males when they struggled with a negative body image [4]. Academic self-efficacy has been found to be a strong predictor of academic success [5]. Therefore, in order to help students to be more academically and personally successful, society as a whole needs to recognize the deleterious impact that media and exposure to perfection can have on the masses. Rather than focusing on the unattainable ideal and images that represent perfection, it would be advantageous to emphasize the concepts of being healthy, attaining self-love, and strength as this may help to combat negative body images amongst adolescents and enhance self-acceptance, self-esteem, self-efficacy, as well as academic performance.

### Contributing Factors to Poor Body Image

There are several factors that have the potential of influencing one's body image including predisposing qualities of the individual, teasing or harassment, the influence of peers and family members, as well as societal influence or media exposure. Students who struggle with self-esteem, self-determination, and pessimism are more likely to internalize negative societal messages and struggle with body dissatisfaction [6]. However, people with higher levels of self-determination are less likely to allow body image dissatisfaction to impede upon them from achieving their goals. Additionally teasing about appearance, personality, or behaviour from peers or family members has been found to be one of the greatest contributing factors to body dissatisfaction. Liang et al., [7] found that students, who were teased consistently, were typically criticized and bullied for their weight, facial characteristics, shape, and heaviness. Brannan and Petri [6] reported that in addition to media, family and peer influences have a profound impact on adolescents' body image and self-esteem, as they are surrounded by them on a daily basis and their feedback directly impacts adolescents' thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and attitudes. Furthermore, many of the attitudes and behaviours adolescents exhibit, are modeled by their parents and parental influence has been shown to be one of the leading contributors to body dissatisfaction [6].

## School Counsellors' Role: Promoting Healthy Body Image amongst Adolescents

School counsellors play a pivotal role in addressing body image concerns as preventative measures within a school. School counsellors can work with students struggling with negative body images so that eating disorders can be prevented and prevention strategies can be implemented in order to further ensure enhanced self-esteem, as well as improved academic performance [8].

**Small group and individual counselling:** School counsellors are encouraged to facilitate small groups and individual counselling sessions addressing positive body image, self-acceptance, and self-esteem in order to provide students battling with negative body images with tools that they can use to improve their self-worth, as well as academic performance. Additionally, school counsellors are encouraged to provide parents with educational resources regarding body image so that parents are knowledgeable of the instrumental role that they play in helping their children to develop positive self-concepts.

**Raising awareness and promoting healthy body image:** School counsellors have the unique opportunity to raise awareness about healthy body image throughout the school. School counsellors are encouraged to promote healthy body images for all students. Rhyne-Winkler and Hubbard [9] found that facilitating lessons on topics addressing body-esteem, locus of control, approval-seeking behaviour, body image, nutrition, and perfectionism have been found to be effective in preventing negative body image and enhancing student self-esteem and academic performance.

**Parent education and faculty training:** School counsellors' are encouraged to provide parents and faculty with knowledge and information about the harmful effects that poor body image has on students' self-esteem, academic performance, as well as educate them about the importance of providing constructive feedback, being complimentary, supportive, mindful, and aware of the impact that they have on students' body images. It is critical for parents and staff to develop appropriate personal attitudes about eating behaviours. Additionally, faculty and parents need to be cognizant of the importance of acting as positive role models, providing social support, as well as modelling normative eating and exercising practices to the adolescents they interact with to further promote enhanced body image and improved academic performance [10].

**Eating disorder referrals:** Although school counsellors are not licensed to diagnose an eating disorder, they can refer students struggling with body image issues or eating disorders to an outside agency specializing in this arena [2]. Counsellors need to encourage students to contact their parents so that they are aware of their child's struggles and can provide necessary support in order to help their child combat their eating disorder and develop healthier eating habits. Additionally, the school counselor needs to work in collaboration with families as a consultant by working holistically with the student, parents, and clinician throughout treatment; specifically if a student needs to attend a outside treatment program for their disorder [2].

## Conclusion

Body image plays a monumental role in the lives of adolescents in regards to their self-esteem, self-worth, and academic performance.

Body image is overwhelmingly impacted by the entities of culture, social media, peers, and one's family members. School counsellors, faculty, and parents are encouraged to work with students on enhancing their self-worth, self-acceptance, and self-determination as these have shown to have a direct impact on formulating a healthy body image. Parents and counsellors need to reiterate to adolescents that the idea of perfection does not exist and that they should strive to be healthy, happy, and strong; mentally and physically. Further, school counsellors need to be mindful of the different types of eating disorders that exist, factors that contribute to negative body image, as well as prevention strategies that can be implemented in order to enhance body image. School counsellors are urged to facilitate small group counselling and individual counselling sessions for students struggling with body image and self-esteem issues, facilitate classroom counselling sessions and workshops addressing self-acceptance, health and wellness, self-care, self-esteem, and self-love, as doing so has shown to empower students struggling with these issues and enhance their coping skills. Lastly, it is pivotal for the media and society to be mindful of the powerful messages being sent out to the masses, as adolescents are particularly impressionable and their health, self-concept, academic performance, and well-being are being robustly impacted by images and advertisements that they are exposed to.

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