

# 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:

- ☆ According to a recent survey of adolescent girls, the media are their main source of information about women’s health issues (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:

- The Commonwealth Fund. (1997). *In Their Own Words: Adolescent Girls Discuss Health and Health Care Issues*.  
Guillen & Barr. (1994). *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 15, 464-472.  
Levine. (1997). *Plenary Presentation at the Third Annual Eating Disorders on Campus Conference*, Penn State University.  
Myers et al. (1992). *Journal of Communication*, 42, 108-133.

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