

# research update



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## Promoting a Healthy Body Image Through Physical Activity

### WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Grogan (2006, p. 524) defines body image as “a person’s perception, feelings and thoughts about his or her body ... usually conceptualized as incorporating body size estimation, evaluation of body attractiveness and emotions associated with body shape and size.”

Negative thoughts about your body create body dissatisfaction. This can cause Body Image Distortion, or BID (where one is no longer able to see one’s body realistically).

Medical research has identified BID as a central symptom for anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. These conditions are generally considered clinical disorders, as they might require clinical care. In contrast, BID is a sub-clinical eating disorder that can substantially disturb patients’ lives (Markula, 2001).

Medical research suggests that about 80% of women suffer from BID (Thompson, 1990). Although most women seem to be unhappy with their body shapes (whether realistically or not), this is not a healthy condition.

Women generally do not develop distorted ideas about their bodies in isolation from their environment. Most women compare themselves to an established ideal body shape. For women the current ideal is a thin, toned and young body. For men, the ideal is a thin, muscular (upper body) and youthful body.

Only a very small minority of the population is born with this ideal body shape (e.g., only five per cent of women). The difference between the ideal body and most people’s “normal” body is a major cause of BID. While this image mostly circulates through the mass media, physical activity settings also promote the unobtainable ideal body shape.

### BODY IMAGE AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY: PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

Physical activity professionals need to consider how to decrease body dissatisfaction and BID. Many fitness professionals want to promote physical activity for improved health but may connect health and well-being to clients’ appearance. Health begins to equate to “looking healthy”: the thin and toned, ideal body.

Exercising only to obtain the ideal body shape is likely to result in failure, as most women will never look like the thin, young magazine models. This approach to “health,” therefore, is likely to cause body dissatisfaction, BID and ultimately, mental and physical ill health.

Exercise benefits do not have to be aligned with improved “looks.” On the contrary, fitness professionals should work actively to change the unhealthy “image body,” not women’s body shapes. Below are some practical suggestions of what individual fitness leaders can do to promote a healthy body image in their exercise sessions.

### Increase Awareness of the Body Ideal and Its Connection to Body Image and Mental Health

Be aware of the artificiality of the current body ideal and discuss this with your clients. Many women do not realize that this image is a construction. Some women find it a great relief to hear that there is nothing wrong with their bodies. There’s nothing wrong with wanting to look attractive, but there are other styles of attractiveness than extreme thinness, “feminine” firmness and teenage youthfulness.

### Re-Analyze the Reasons for the Exercises You Prescribe

Do you often emphasize that an exercise session needs at least 20 minutes of continuous cardiovascular fitness to burn extra fat storage?

Do you promote resistance training by explaining that increased muscle mass burns calories even at rest and emphasize that a muscular person will consume more calories in everyday life than her less muscular counterpart?

Do you always include plenty of exercises for the abdomen, bottom, thighs and underarms, because these “problem spots” appear particularly resistant to toning and are prone to excess fat and flab?

These examples link physical activity to improved appearance rather than health benefits. The main aim of these exercises is to work towards the thin and toned ideal. Emphasizing the client’s bodily deficiencies is likely to cause body dissatisfaction.

Analyze why you use these strategies. For example, ask yourself whether all your clients really need to lose weight. Do you need to promote weight loss in every exercise session? What type of strength do your clients need in their everyday life? Do they really need stronger gluteus maximus or abductors to be healthier?

### Rethink the Goals for Physical Activity

Fitness and physical activity can have goals other than working endlessly towards an impossible ideal. Perhaps we want to promote better everyday functionality for our clients. We can also work to link health to general well-being rather than looks or promote the simple enjoyment of physical activity.

Being sensitive to body dissatisfaction and BID is an important aspect of promoting healthy physical activity participation. Therefore, it is important to disconnect the healthy body from the narrowly defined thin and toned ideal body and to create exercise practices that empower everybody to be physically active.

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