Break It Down!
Helping Students Improve Body Image

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Today’s Talk

- Introduction
- The Problem
- Harmful vs. Helpful Strategies
- Messaging Dos and Don’ts
- Summary
How Do You Define a Healthy Person?
How Do You Define a Healthy Person?

– Definition of health from Webster’s Dictionary
  – Condition of being sound in body, mind or spirit
  – Condition in which someone or something is thriving or doing well
  – Note that weight and size are not mentioned in this definition
  – Plays a role in body image
  – Body image plays a role in health
Introduction

Who we are

Why we are here
Introduction: Who We Are

- Concerned healthcare professionals with expertise in eating disorders (ED)
- Work with young people + their families
- Many years of experience
- Created a group to address weight bias and to promote positive body image - Providers Against Weight Bias (PAWB)
Introduction- Why We are Here

– Impact of the “obesity epidemic”: led to efforts to prevent it
– Measurements such as BMI/ weight/ calories used as health parameters
– Popularity of documentaries that promote a particular dietary practice increased
– Children and teens are particularly susceptible to the harms of these strategies
The Teen Brain

- Black and white thinking
- All or nothing
- Lack of abstract thinking
- Difficulty seeing the gray
Introduction: Why We are Here


- Identifies interventions that inadvertently promote EDs through obesity prevention efforts
- Provides guidance for methods that don’t increase risk of EDs
- Review of multiple large studies
Recommendation from AAP Clinical Report

Shift to evidence based practices that promote a focus on behaviors and body positive language rather than weight
The Problem

Weight Biased Messaging
Leads to Body Dissatisfaction
The Problem: Body Dissatisfaction

- Approximately half of teenage girls and one-quarter of teenage boys are dissatisfied with their bodies
  - These numbers are higher in teenagers in larger bodies
  - Body dissatisfaction known risk factor for EDs
  - Higher scores of body dissatisfaction associated with more dieting and unhealthy weight-control behaviors in both boys and girls
    - Reduced physical activity in girls
    - More binge eating in boys
The Problem: Focus on Weight

- Past focus on weight proved to be harmful and ineffective
- Focus on weight leads to poor self-esteem, bullying, body dissatisfaction, chronic dieting
- Weight loss as a way to get healthy predisposes to eating disorders
- Eating disorders are the 3rd most common chronic illness in teens
More than 30 million people in the U.S. will struggle with an eating disorder every hour from eating disorder complications.

Eating disorders are complex illnesses, influenced by a combination of genetic, psychological, sociocultural, and physiological factors.

LGBTQ individuals are more likely to struggle with an eating disorder.

Eating disorders are the 3rd most common chronic illness in teens.

More than 70% of people don't get treatment because of stigma, access barriers, and misinformation.

Recovery is possible. The sooner someone seeks help, the better the outcome.

Eating disorders don't only affect women... at least 10 million men will struggle in their lifetime.
The Problem - Cultural Influences

- Dominant culture defines health as:
  - Thinness
  - Losing weight
  - Dieting
  - Exercising to change your body

- Because of this many young people develop:
  - Eating disorders
  - Body shame
  - Unhealthy relationship to food/exercise
FALSE ASSUMPTION
WARNING
IT'S HARD TO BE A LITTLE GIRL IF YOU'RE NOT.
Stop childhood obesity. strong4life.com

WARNING
MY FAT MAY BE FUNNY TO YOU BUT IT'S KILLING ME.
Stop childhood obesity. strong4life.com

You are what you eat
Unhealthy Choices
Healthy Choices
A Paradigm Shift

- Our Goal is to shift the cultural paradigm:
  - To body positivity
  - To neutral messages about food
  - To exercise in a way that's fun and joyful and away from exercise for weight loss and changing body shape
The Problem: Nutrition Misinformation

- Much misinformation about food and calories (e.g. internet, fad diet books, some documentaries)
- FDA food labels are NOT based on information for teens
- Nutritional needs are not the same for everyone
  - Variables include: gender, activity level, stage of development
  - Best assessed by health care professional
Harmful vs. Helpful Strategies

What the Evidence Based Research Shows
Harmful Strategies: Dieting

- Leading risk factor for developing ED
  - Students restricting intake or skipping meals are 18 x more likely to develop an ED
- Does not work, 95% failure rate
- Several large studies have associated dieting with greater weight gain and increased risk of binge eating
- Negative psychological effects
Harmful Strategies: Weight Talk

- Weight talk
  - Several studies have found that parental weight talk, whether it involves encouraging their children to diet or talking about their own dieting, is linked to weight gain and EDs
  - Conversations about weight lead students to:
    - Diet
    - Engage in unhealthy weight control behaviors
    - Binge eat
Harmful Strategies: Weight Teasing

- 40% of preteens experience weight teasing by peers or family members
- Has long term effect no matter their size
- Ten years later; associated with unhealthy weight control behaviors and binge eating
Other Harmful Strategies

– Calculating BMI
– Calorie counting
– Showing food/diet promoting documentaries
– Physical fitness testing?
You are in a Body-Positive Zone

Please refrain from the following:

- Diet / Weight Talk
- Body Policing (criticizing appearances)
- Food Shaming (judging food options or eating habits)
- Health or Concern Trolling (keep your health advice to yourself)
- Gender Policing (reinforcing gender norms)

Please Do Embrace All Bodies, Abilities, and Genders

nalgonapositivitypride.com
Helpful Strategies: Food

- Promote family meals
  - Improves quality of meals and snacks
  - Protects from ED behaviors
- Encourage breakfast and lunch (often skipped)
- Three meals, 2-3 snacks /day
- Balance not perfection
Helpful Strategies: Physical Activity

- Encourage physical activity for fun
- Promote physical activity without linking to weight or changing shape
- Discuss non-weight health benefits
- Talk about the benefits of strength
- Welcome all bodies!
Messaging Dos and Don’ts
What to Say, What Not to Say!
Helpful Messages

– Promote body acceptance by modeling it
– Remember kids are listening!
– Focus on what the body does for you vs. appearance
– Encourage students to NOT discuss weight
Helpful Messages

- Address and redirect weight talk
- Promote use of neutral language about shape, size, activity
- Remember: Body shaming is bullying!!
Helpful Messages

- Support a non weight, non diet approach to health as recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics
- Use self comparisons or personal best to evaluate progress
Messages to Avoid

– Avoid labeling food as good or bad
– Uncouple the need to exercise to earn food
– Avoid omitting food groups
– Steer clear of food rules
– Avoid showing food documentaries, unless it presents a balanced view
Role Play

- Positive examples of teachers redirecting or reframing weight bias conversations
  - Friend : Friend
  - Parent : Child
Body Image Activity: Practice What We Preach

- Share with us something you like about your body or something you are glad it can do
- How could you use this with students?
  - Leave cards up in gym, classroom, etc
Summary

- Body dissatisfaction leads to poor self esteem, troubled food relationships and eating disorders
- Schools can be part of the solution
- Be aware of and avoid weight biased messaging
- Provide a safe space for all bodies
- Activity/movement for fun and for everyone
Body Image Resources

- The Body Positive
  https://www.thebodypositive.org

- National Eating Disorder Assoc. On Positive Body Image
  https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/body-image-0

- Positive Body Image Game Ideas
  https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/marci-warhaftnadler/healthy-body-image-kids_b_3460297.html
Thoughts of Dog (Twitter)

“everytime i get brushed. i have to take my collar off. the human always laughs and says i’m naked. but the jokes on them. i am very confident in my body.”