

The Media, Body Image, and Eating Disorders



National Eating Disorders Association

We live in a media-saturated world and do not control the message.

Mass media provides a significantly influential context for people to learn about body ideals and the value placed on being attractive.

- Over 80% of Americans watch television daily. On average, these people watch over three hours per day.
- American children engage in increasing amounts of media use, a trend fueled largely by the growing availability of internet access through phones and laptops. On a typical day, 8 – 18-year-olds are engaged with some form of media about 7.5 hours. Most of this time is spent watching television, though children play video games more than an hour per day and are on their computers for more than an hour per day. Even media aimed at elementary school age children, such as animated cartoons and children’s videos, emphasize the importance of being attractive. Sexually objectified images of girls and women in advertisements are most likely to appear in men’s magazines. Yet the second most common source of such images is the advertisements in teen magazines directed at adolescent girls (Stankiewicz & Rosselli, 2008).

Effects of media

There is no single cause of body dissatisfaction or disordered eating. But research is increasingly clear that media do indeed contribute and that exposure to and pressure exerted by media increase body dissatisfaction and disordered eating.

- Numerous correlational and experimental studies have linked exposure to the thin ideal in mass media to body dissatisfaction, internalization of the thin ideal, and disordered eating among women.
- The effect of media on women’s body dissatisfaction, thin ideal internalization, and disordered eating appears to be stronger among young adults than children and adolescents. . This may suggest that long-term exposure during childhood and adolescence lays the foundation for the negative effects of media during early adulthood.
- Black-oriented television shows may serve a protective function; Hispanic and Black girls and women who watch more Black-oriented television have higher body satisfaction.
- Pressure from mass media to be muscular also appears to be related to body dissatisfaction among men. This effect may be smaller than among women but it is still significant.
- Young men seem to be more negatively affected by the media images than adolescent boys are.