

RCPsych Eating Disorders Section: Statement on the influence of the media on eating disorders

Background

Eating disorders are serious mental illnesses with high levels of morbidity and mortality. Although biological and genetic factors play a particularly important role in the development and maintenance of these illnesses, psychological and social factors are also significant. The peak age of onset is in adolescence when peer and social pressures are important developmental influences.

The media (e.g. magazines, television, the internet and advertising) is highly influential in both representing and propagating social pressures and public opinion. An increasing body of research now indicates that the media has a role in both providing a social context for the development and maintenance of eating disorders. This is achieved by propagating unobtainable body ideals and the acceptability of dieting leading to lowered mood, body dissatisfaction and eating disorder symptoms. (Groesz et al 2002, Stice 2002. Becker et al 2002. Dove Self Esteem Fund studies 2005).

Areas of influence of the media

1. Visual imagery

- a. The promotion of the thin body ideal. Pre-teen or underweight models are used as the predominant image with a lack of diversity in body size, shape, age and ethnicity.
- b. The portrayal of physical perfection as attainable, and the norm through extensive use of digital enhancement or airbrushing. There is a lack of reality-based imagery.

2. Magazine content (particularly magazines aimed at the adolescent and young adult population)

- a. A continuing and significant prevalence in the number of articles about dieting, body image perfection and plastic surgery within magazines. These are portrayed as a means to enhance self-esteem with a relative dearth of articles focusing on emotional and personal development for healthy self-esteem.
- b. Articles on dieting techniques with an absence of reality about the lack of long-term effectiveness of diets and the medical dangers of extreme diets.
- c. 'Body critical' articles, particularly those targeting celebrities for having eating disorders or for being overweight, underweight or physically imperfect. This normalises body criticism as socially acceptable and valued.

3. Portrayal of eating disorders as mild disorders rather than serious mental illnesses

- a. Media coverage focusing on and 'glamorising' anorexia nervosa and weight loss illnesses, rather than fully discussing of the breadth of eating disorders including bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorder.

- b. 'Body critical' articles effectively portraying eating disorders as personal weaknesses and shameful, rather than serious mental illnesses requiring specific treatment.

Summary and Call for Action

The RCPsych Eating Disorders Section makes the following recommendations:

- Use of role models throughout the mass media that cover a diversity of weight, shape, age, disability and ethnicity.
- Cessation of the use of underweight models.
- Raising awareness of use and extent of digital manipulation of images through use of a kite mark.

The RCPsych Eating Disorders Section specifically calls for:

1. The next Government to commit to setting up a forum for the development of an editorial ethical code. This code should promote ethical and health aware advertising/media content, prevent the use of 'body critical' articles, and encourage the production of balanced and responsible articles with an accurate portrayal of eating disorders. The forum should include representation from politicians, advertising agencies, magazine editors, relevant regulatory bodies/stakeholders, eating disorder experts and eating disorder organisations.
2. The promotion of media literacy within schools, as outlined by the eating disorders charity beat in its new manifesto (published 22 February 2010). We support beat's work in schools, and call for this form of education to become a standard component of the National Curriculum for all children and adolescents.

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References

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