

## Body Image in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Youngsters

by Julia McCreary\*

*At the university, I noticed the extreme body image concern a friend was experiencing and wondered whether it was related to his homosexuality. My friend has an intense desire to gain muscle mass. This became a major concern after his transition to the university when he realized he had far less time to work out than he had at home. On his return, after going home for Thanksgiving, he was stressed about the muscle mass he had lost during his first few months at the university (friends and family back home noted he had lost weight). Another of my friends, a bisexual female, struggles with her body image as well. She constantly talks about a desire to be skinny, and feels she is less worthy if she gains weight, though she recognizes she is currently at a healthy weight. When I began working in the Center, I explored the topic of body image and realized there was little information regarding body image and the LGBTQ community. Given the discrepancy between the literature and the concerns about body image that I personally observed among my LGBTQ friends, I prepared a report; the edited version follows.*

Studies of body image tend to leave out LGBTQ children and adolescents. Given the mental health implications of identity and body dissatisfaction concerns, increasing attention to these youngsters is needed, especially as research on intersectionality and the minority stress model is pursued.

As compared to heterosexual males and females, available research does suggest that non-heterosexuals report having more body dissatisfaction. And gay, lesbian, and bisexual students of both genders are reported to have a greater likelihood of dieting and binge eating (Calzo, Austin, & Micali, 2018). In addition, it has been reported that, as compared to heterosexual males, gay and bisexual males feel more pressure to change their body type by increasing muscularity; gay males tend to see themselves as underweight, while bisexual males and males who had previously been in same-sex relationships tend to see themselves as overweight (Hadland, Austin, Goodenow, & Calzo, 2014). Those trying to gain weight seek to increase muscle mass and avoid fat (Calzo, Austin, & Micali, 2018).

Body image concerns of lesbian and bisexual females are related to inaccurate perceptions of being underweight (Hadland, Austin, Goodenow, & Calzo, 2014). Bisexual females can feel pressure to look “ideal” to both males and females (Gordon, Austin, Pantalone, et al., 2019). And transgender adolescents report wanting to lose or gain weight (Peterson, Matthews, Cops-Smith, & Conrad, 2016; Roder et al., 2018).

In general, then, many non-heterosexual males and females may be at risk for purging, fasting, bingeing, and related mental health concerns (Hadland, Austin, Goodenow, & Calzo, 2014). The minority stress model suggests that LGBTQ youth are disproportionately affected by concerns about body image (Meyer, 2003; Meyer, Schwartz, & Frost, 2008). Aligning the minority stress model with intersectionality suggests that pressures for an ideal body vary with race and ethnicity, as well as sexual orientation (Gordon, et al. 2019). Increased body dissatisfaction among LGBTQ students is hardly surprising given the negative impact on self-esteem of victimization, internalized homophobia, and media influences (Calzo, Austin, & Micali, 2018).

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\*Julia prepared a project report on this topic as part of her involvement with the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA. This is an edited version.

## Addressing Body Image Problems

Bodily dissatisfaction is highly correlated with such mental health problems as depression, anxiety, and suicide risk (Tabaac, Perrin, & Benotsch, 2018). It also can be a factor interfering with functioning at school.

Clearly, a positive relationship between LGBTQ youngsters and their parents is important in developing a positive self-image and body satisfaction (Calzo, Austin, & Micali, 2018). Primary caretakers also are called on to address problems as they occur.

Schools can help by focusing on *system changes* that (1) eliminate factors contributing to students' problems and (2) help prevent and ameliorate such problems. The changes should approach eating disorders in the context of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching (Adelman & Taylor, 2009; 2016; 2017; 2018).

From a review of the literature, here are some examples of what schools need to have in place to better address concerns about body image and LGBTQ students:

- anti bullying policies that encompass all forms of diversity and physical appearance
- mechanisms to inform students, families, and staff about the consequences of prejudice, victimization, eating and other disorders, and about how students having problems can access protection and help (On a daily basis, teachers and support staff need to play a proactive role in this respect.)
- policies and practices for countering stigma and the negative impact of media and social networking
- health education programs that appropriately educate students and staff about the normality of diversity. Among the goals of such programs should be to make LGBTQ and other subgroups feel accepted by their peers and authority figures and effective strategies for countering harassment
- processes to prevent future occurrences of harassment (e.g., counseling for perpetrators)
- processes to help victims, including referrals for mental health supports and other assistance as needed (Note: Transgender students are especially at a high level of risk for discrimination and related problems.)
- support groups for those struggling with identity, body image, or eating disorders
- proactive practices to engender mutual respect (e.g., using LGBTQ students' preferred pronouns and encouraging their peers to do so as well)
- capacity building (including professional development of all staff) for development of an effective system to prevent and correct problems manifested at school.

*A Cautionary Note:* While discussions about diversity, body image, self esteem, and mutual respect are appropriate in classrooms, the psychological and familial components of student problems (e.g., depression, abuse) are beyond the scope of classroom exploration. When such topics arise, teachers must have a support system in place at the school so they can lead students to appropriate assistance.

*Being valued at school can translate to feeling valued in society as a whole and improve schooling and subsequent outcomes.*

## Appendix

### Examples of Approaches to Enhancing Body Acceptance

Available research reports that body acceptance is highly correlated with self-esteem and satisfaction with living; body dissatisfaction is highly related to emotional, behavioral, and learning problems. Programs have been developed to enhance body acceptance. Here are some examples:

*The Health Promoting Schools Framework* targets internal and external influences within the school environment such as school curriculum, policies and attitudes as well as community services resources and activities. As described, the framework aims promote the adoption of lifestyles conducive to good health, provide an environment that supports and encourages healthy lifestyles, and enable students and staff to take action for a healthier community and healthier living conditions. It encompasses three major areas of intervention in the school and community: 1) school curriculum, teaching, and learning; 2) school ethos, environment, and organization; and 3) school-community partnerships and services. <https://www.cochranelibrary.com/cdsr/doi/10.1002/14651858.CD008958/full>

*The Body Project* is described as a cognitive-dissonance-based body acceptance intervention designed to help adolescent girls and young women resist sociocultural pressures to conform to the thin-ideal and reduce their pursuit of thinness. It is a group-based intervention that provides a forum for confronting unrealistic beauty ideals and engages them in the development of healthy body image through verbal, written, and behavioral exercises. The underlying rationale is that voluntarily arguing against the societal appearance-ideal reduces subscription to the ideal and leads to decreases in eating disorders (Stice, Marti, Spoor, Presnell & Shaw, 2008). <http://www.bodyprojectsupport.org/>

*The Healthy Weight Intervention* is described as a six-session group intervention designed to educate participants about proper energy balance in order to create improvement in nutrition intake and fitness. The intervention comprises hour-long sessions with 6 to 10 participants. An experimental evaluation found positive outcomes on BMI, exercise intensity, healthy eating, bulimic symptoms, and negative affect (Stice, Marti, Spoor, Presnell & Shaw, 2008). [https://healthyweightsupport.weebly.com/uploads/1/4/2/1/14217397/hw\\_script\\_\\_handouts.pdf](https://healthyweightsupport.weebly.com/uploads/1/4/2/1/14217397/hw_script__handouts.pdf)

*Healthy Body Images-Teaching Kids to Eat and Love their Bodies Too* is a curriculum to address body image, eating, fitness, and weight concerns. The focus is on body image, physical activity, weight concerns and eating. The commercially published work contains eleven scripted lessons for grades 4 - 6 and is described as adaptable for any age or venue. <http://bodyimagehealth.org/healthy-bodies-curriculum>

## Some References and Resources

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### **Organizations Focusing on Eating Disorders**

National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) – <http://www.nimh.nih.gov>

National Mental Health Information Center – <http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov>

Academy for Eating Disorders – <http://www.aedweb.org>

National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders – <http://www.anad.org>

National Eating Disorders Association – <http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org>

### **A Few Additional Resources**

*Understanding and Learning about Student Health*

[http://www.columbia.edu/itc/hs/medical/residency/peds/new\\_compeds\\_site/pdfs\\_new/school\\_based\\_health/Eating\\_Disorders.pdf](http://www.columbia.edu/itc/hs/medical/residency/peds/new_compeds_site/pdfs_new/school_based_health/Eating_Disorders.pdf)

*Five Things Teachers Should Know About Eating Disorders...*

[http://www.eatingdisordersblogs.com/eating\\_disorders\\_in\\_school/2011/11/five-things-teachers-should-know-about-eating-disorders-.html](http://www.eatingdisordersblogs.com/eating_disorders_in_school/2011/11/five-things-teachers-should-know-about-eating-disorders-.html)

*Eating Disorders – Information for Teachers/Youth Workers*

<http://www.bodywhys.ie/m/uploads/files/TeachersLeaflet.pdf>

*Discovery Education lesson plans- Overcoming Disorders*

<http://www.discoveryeducation.com/teachers/free-lessonplans/overcoming-eating-disorders.cfm>

*A Lesson for Teachers in Addressing the Eating Disorder Bully*

<http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/lesson-teachers-addressing-eatingdisorder-bully>

***For more, see our Center's Online Clearinghouse Quick Find on Eating Disorders***

[http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p3006\\_01.htm](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p3006_01.htm)

## **Organizations and Resources Focusing on Sexual Minority Students**

It's Elementary, Talking About Gay Issues –

<https://www.newday.com/film/its-elementary-talking-about-gay-issues-school>

Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere (COLAGE) – <https://www.colage.org/>

Creating Safe Schools for Lesbian and Gay Students: A resource guide for school staff –

<http://members.tripod.lycos.com/~twood/guide.html>

Project 10 – <http://www.project10.org/>

Safe School Coalition – <http://safeschoolscoalition.org/safe.html>

Trans Youth Links – <http://members.tripod.com/~twood/transyouth.html>

Gay-Straight Alliance Network – <http://www.gsanetwork.org/>

GLSEN: The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network – <http://www.glsen.org/chapters>

GLSEN's National School Climate Survey –

<http://www.glsen.org/article/2013-national-school-climate-survey>

GLSEN's Safe Space Kit – <http://www.glsen.org/safespace>

Transgender Model District Policy –

<https://www.glsen.org/article/transgender-model-district-policy>

GLSEN's Ready, Set, Respect! Elementary Toolkit – <http://www.glsen.org/readysetrepect>

Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) – <http://www.pflag.org/>

The Body – <http://www.thebody.com/>

Terrence Higgins Trust – Teaching & Information Packs, Reading List – <http://www.tht.org.uk/>

American Psychological Association <http://www.apa.org/pubinfo/answers.html>

*For more, see our Center's Online Clearinghouse Quick Finds on*

>Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual Issues – [http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p3017\\_02.htm](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p3017_02.htm)

>Hate Groups: Helping Students and Preventing Hate Crime –

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/hategroups.htm>