

Body image program reduces onset of obesity and eating disorders

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In their research on eating disorders, Oregon Research Institute (ORI) scientists help young women reduce the influence of the “thin ideal,” which is described as associating success and happiness with being thin.

ORI scientist Eric Stice, Ph.D. and his colleagues have found that their obesity prevention program reduced the risk for onset of eating disorders by 61% and obesity by 55% in young women. These effects continued for as long as 3 years after the program ended. Results of this study are published in the April issue of the Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology.

These results are noteworthy because, to date, the idea that we can reduce risk for future onset of eating disorders and obesity has been an unrealized goal: over 80 prevention programs have been evaluated, but no previous program had been found to significantly reduce risk for onset of these serious health problems.

Stice notes that, “One reason these programs might be more effective is that they require youth to take a more healthy perspective, which leads them to internalize the more healthy attitudes. In addition, these programs have simple take-home messages, which may be easier to remember in the future than messages from more complex prevention programs.”

Funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), Stice has been studying eating disorders for 18 years. He has conducted this line of

research at Stanford University and the University of Texas, and now continues at the Oregon Research Institute in Eugene, Oregon. He is presently funded by NIH to conduct two research studies to further test these programs with young women in Eugene/Springfield.

The obesity prevention program, called Healthy Weight, helps adolescents adopt a healthier lifestyle, wherein they gradually reduce intake of the least healthy portion of their diet and increase physical activity. This program simply teaches youth to balance their energy intake with their energy needs, and to do so on a permanent basis, rather than on the transient basis which is more typical of diets. College-age women in Eugene/Springfield are participating in this study.

The eating disorder prevention program, called the Body Project, consists of four one-hour weekly sessions in which participants critique the thin ideal espoused for women in our culture and learn how to challenge current and future pressures to be thin. The program has also produced reductions in other important outcomes such as body dissatisfaction and eating disorder symptoms. Stice has partnered with area high schools on this study and has trained high school counselors to facilitate the weekly sessions.

“It is our hope that other institutions and communities will adopt this program for delivery in their schools,” notes Stice; “If this program is delivered to enough youth, it should be possible to reduce the prevalence of these serious health problems.”

Given that eating disorders are one of the most common problems faced by young women and that obesity is presently credited with 111,000 deaths per year in the US, it is vital to develop brief prevention programs for these pernicious conditions. At least seven other institutions have begun delivering these interventions in the US and in other countries.

Source: Oregon Research Institute

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