

## **Encouraging a Healthy Body Image**

Healthy bodies come in all shapes and sizes but we live in a society that places value on looking a certain way. Youth are often bombarded with media images of super thin models and celebrities that seem impossible to measure up to. The pressure to conform to a certain body image can result in poor self-esteem. This can lead to anxiety, depression, disordered eating and eating disorders. Mental Health & Addictions Services in the Western region are seeing youth as young as elementary age presenting with these issues.

Positive body image means that most of the time you feel comfortable in your body and you feel good about how you look. How can parents help their children maintain a healthy body image? This can be very challenging for a number of reasons. Adolescents tend to be more self-conscious about their appearance and often focus on how they look as an indicator of self-worth. However, as parents you have the ability to influence your child during this difficult time so they can develop a positive body image no matter what their size.

Western Health aims to educate the public about the dangers of eating disorders and the importance of promoting a healthy body image. Postcards with parenting tips promoting healthy body image and contact information for Mental Health and Addiction Services, as well as the prevention and promotion website, were distributed to students Grade 4-9 in the Western region earlier this year.

### **Know the Warning Signs:**

- Change in attitude/appears sad or anxious
- Expresses body image complaints/concerns
- Talks about dieting/avoiding nutritious foods because they are fattening
- Is the target of body or weight bullying
- Spends increasing amount of time alone or isolate/loss of friends
- Change in clothing style (for example to baggy clothes)
- Frequent trips to the bathroom/faucets
- Frequent excuses not to eat
- Obsessed with maintaining low weight to enhance performance in activities like sport, dance, acting or modeling

### **Things to Avoid:**

- Don't complain about your body, talk about diets, or calories and weight in front of children.
- Don't ignore negative comments about physical appearance. Use them as teachable moments.
- Don't encourage or laugh at jokes that make fun of a person's appearance.
- Don't set amounts of food for your children to eat. Don't make them finish their plate if they are full or limit food if they are hungry. Help them to listen to their bodies.

- Don't use food as a reward or punishment.
- Avoid labeling food as "bad," "sinful," or "junk food." Emphasize the positive aspects of healthy eating, rather than the effect of unhealthy eating.

### **Things to Do:**

- Teach children that their self-worth is not related to how they look.
- Model a positive body image, without focus on food and weight. Show you're happy, healthy and active at any body size.
- Make family meals a time to enjoy food and talking with each other. Save arguments, TV, telephone and difficult decisions for later.
- Model a healthy lifestyle. Participate in exercise you enjoy. Let your child decide what physical activity she/he prefers and help them be active by limiting TV and other inactive play.
- Encourage self-awareness and critical thinking skills. Help children learn to solve problems in healthy ways. Criticize the culture that promotes unhealthy and unrealistic body images.

If you are concerned about yourself or somebody you care about it is important to start the conversation. Through supportive open dialogue we can reduce the stigma and shame that affects many people with eating disorders or struggling with unhealthy weight and food obsessions.

### **Where to Get Help**

For more information or support, contact your family doctor, Eating Disorder Foundation of NL at 1-855-722-0500 or <http://www.edfnl.ca/> or your local Mental Health and Addiction Services Office:

Port aux Basques	695-6250
Burgeo	886-1550
Stephenville	643-8740
Corner Brook (Adult)	634-4506
Corner Brook (Children & Youth)	634-4171
Deer Lake	635-7830
Norris Point	458-2381
Port Saunders	861-9125

Youth aged 12-29 can contact a Youth Outreach Worker for help:

Corner Brook and area	634-4171
Stephenville and area	643-2247
Port aux Basques and area	695-6901
Bonne Bay and area	458-2381 Ext. 271

## **Crisis and Help Line Information**

Mental Health Crisis Line	1-888-737-4668
Kids Help Phone	1-800-668-6868
NL Health Line	1-888-709-2929

For more information on programs and resources, contact the Regional Mental Health Promotion Consultant at 634-4927, or visit [www.westernhealth.nl.ca](http://www.westernhealth.nl.ca),

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