

Social Media and Body Image: #Fitspiration at Its Worst

HELP CLIENTS FOCUS ON REAL EATING AND EXERCISE CHANGE, NOT FANTASY PHOTO POSTS.

BY NANCY CLARK, MS, RD, CSSD

Food is fuel. But food is (seemingly) fattening. If you think you are too fat, the “obvious” solution is to go on a diet, restrict calories—and deprive your body of valuable nutrients. The problem is diets do not work. (If diets worked, then everyone who has ever been on a diet would be lean.) Plus, your body deserves better than to be denied and deprived of valuable nutrients.

No matter how many times you’re told these truisms, just peeking into Instagram, Facebook or YouTube tells you something else: You need a perfect physique, and all these diet and exercise tips will help you get it. Unfortunately, social media posts have a powerful impact on how we see

ourselves (flawed!)—particularly if we spend hours each day comparing ourselves to The Ideal Body. No longer do we ask mirrors on the wall who is the fairest of us all. Rather, we scroll through photos on smartphones to figure out which body we’d like to clone.

The trouble is that seeing image after image of skinny, toned bodies leads to diet pills, quick diet fixes, magic cleanses and myriad forms of food restriction that claim to fix any body flaw. None of this is healthy. Research on the impact of social media on women’s body image verifies that exposure to images of attractive celebrities and peers harms their self-image (Brown & Tiggemann 2016). Comparing yourself to your friends, and friends of friends, on social media can easily put you in a bad mood, harboring negative thoughts about your body. The alleged fix: restricting food and exercising excessively.

#Fitstagram = #NotScience

If you explore social media, you’re bound to find “fitstagram” that share the fitness journey of people of all ages, sizes and



SNAP DECISION: EATING DISORDERS MAY BE LINKED TO REPEATED EXPOSURE TO IDOLIZED ONLINE IMAGES.



shapes. Yes, these posts inspire some people—hence, the hashtag #fitspiration—and may motivate them to stay on track with a healthy eating and exercise program. But for others, the same messages can backfire, making them feel inadequate, anxious and preoccupied with perceived body flaws. Such reactions can pave the path to exercising too much and/or eating too little. Hence, it's no surprise that folks who spend too much time on social media are at risk for developing eating disorders (Cohen & Blaszczynski 2015). The drive for thinness can easily override the desire for health.

Social media messages aren't typically backed by science. And self-taught fitness gurus are not health professionals. Unfortunately, seemingly innocent messages can do unintended damage including bad mood and body dissatisfaction (Brown & Tiggemann 2016). You'll find militaristic posts ("You can have results or excuses, not both.") that grab attention but also breed inadequacy. A more compassionate post might read: "You can totally improve your health and fitness—and occasionally make excuses not to work out every single day. That's fine and normal" (Van Hare 2016).

#BodyDissatisfaction Studies

Body dissatisfaction is one of the most consistent and robust risk factors for developing an eating disorder. It is associated with low self-esteem and depression, which puts it at the core of our physical and mental health. A German

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study showed that almost half of 25- to 74-year-old women and one-third of men of the same age had body dissatisfaction (von Lengerke 2012).

While most research on the effect of social media on body image has involved women, men also have body-image struggles. A survey of more than 2,000 Canadian male high-school students found that about 30% were dissatisfied with their bodies. Though some wanted to lose weight, the majority wanted to gain weight. Males tend to be more concerned about muscularity and how to gain bulk (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al. 2016).

Unfortunately, the thinness in social media posts is thinner than the women we see in real life. A survey of 600 Instagram images indicates the vast majority of pictures showed only one body type: thin and toned (Tiggemann & Zaccardo 2016). Repeated exposure to these idolized physiques leads us to believe that lean, toned bodies are normal, attainable, expected and central to attractiveness. The end result: overwhelming dissatisfaction with one's own body (Grabe et al. 2016). And we all know what that leads to: dieting that can be more harmful than helpful.

Getting to #BodyPositive

Social media doesn't have to erode people's body image. It can also be a way to rebel against social pressures to look a certain way. Michigan State runner Rachele Schulist did just that. She used Instagram to speak out about athletes and body stereotypes:

"The idea that you have to look a certain way and be thin to be a fast runner is bulls***. In our society, body image is such a hard thing due to social media because you can see a picture and just compare. I was constantly comparing. ... I wasn't confident in how I looked. I'll be honest. I spent a lot of nights crying just because I was so anxious, sad and hungry all the time. It was hard—really hard."

After posting her story on Instagram, she received an overwhelming number of supportive responses. She had no idea how many other athletes shared her struggles, and she was able to give them a voice (Chavez 2016). Social media can also make a positive impact!

Changing Clients' #SelfTalk

As fitness leaders, you have a huge opportunity to teach people that humans come in differing sizes and shapes. The

dog kingdom has this figured out: The Saint Bernard does not look like a greyhound—nor does it yearn to be one. The Labrador does not envy the poodle, nor does the beagle want to be a Chihuahua. Each dog is proud of its size and genetics. Can't we be at least as smart as our dogs?

If your clients believe they have flawed bodies, tell them they might be wrong. We are all born with perfect bodies that are likely still perfect. After all, beauty comes from the inside out. If they feel ashamed because they wear clothing that is bigger than, let's say, size 2, they are still "size beautiful," not ugly and horrible as they may see themselves. An Instagram post

Look for Body Love in the Right Places

It's time to rebel against the idea that people need to look strong, lean, sculpted and shredded to be accepted. Instead of spending hours on social media, people who struggle with body image could better spend their time with a sports nutritionist who is a registered dietitian (RD) and can offer professional, personalized weight management advice. The referral network at www.scandpg.org can help you find a local sports RD.

For clients who cannot seem to break the social media habit, at least encourage them to look at positive social media options. Good news: These messages can have a positive impact. Body dissatisfaction among women and girls is decreasing. Boys and men, however, are still caught up in wanting to be more muscular (Karazsia et al. 2016).

Model true #fitspo on social media by liking and using posts that are more positive and approachable:

#ImNoAngel
 #PlusIsEqual
 #AerieREAL
 #bodykindness
 #fatpositiveparenting
 #YouAreEnough
 #curves
 #loveyourbody
 #bodybeautiful
 #bigandbeautiful
 #flauntyourflaws

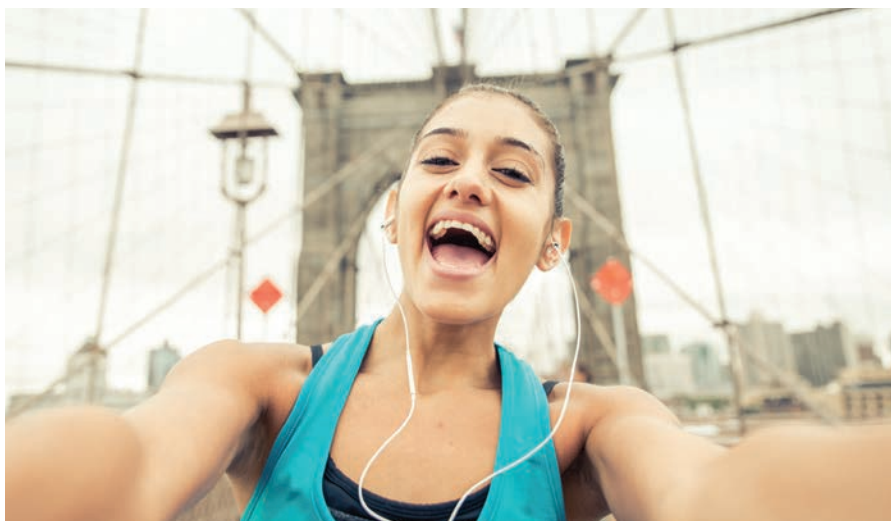
Praise the effort put into eating well and exercising for

health. Be comfortable modeling your authentic body;

make no disparaging comments about your "fat thighs."

Stop any fat talk and body shaming; focus on the positive.

Encourage gratitude for all your body allows you to do.



from kellyyufit says it all: "Eat like you love yourself. Move like you love yourself. Speak like you love yourself. Act like you love yourself. #SelfLoveWins."

Rethink Your #PepTalks

As a fitness leader, you may want to think twice before commenting on a client's body. Does "you look great" mean the client must have looked horrible before? Praise the effort put into eating well and exercising for health. Be comfortable modeling your authentic body; make no disparaging comments about your "fat thighs." Stop any fat talk and body shaming; focus on the positive. Encourage gratitude for all the good things your body allows you to do. And for certain, discourage your clients from spending hours on the internet looking for body love in the wrong places.

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