

Body Image: The Quest for Perfection **Study Guide**

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Body Image: The Quest for Perfection is a 30- minute video designed to promote conversation about the feelings and sources connected to the issues surrounding body image. We explore the important role that body image plays in women's lives throughout many sectors of society.

In the video, seven women go on a three-day retreat to share their feelings about their bodies, discuss the sources of these feelings and explore the images of women in mass media. We selected the participants because their collective experiences represent a wide range of attitudes about body image in our society.

We hope our video will encourage viewers to think more specifically about what it means to live in a culture where evidence of strong feelings about body image--how we appear to other and ourselves--abounds. Reports of eating disorders, the popularity of cosmetic plastic surgery, and obsession with physical fitness have all been on the rise. The contribution of mass media to feeling about body image is still not understood. Our goal for this video is rather simple; we want viewers to talk about the obsession with body image in our culture and how this has affected their feelings and thoughts about their own bodies. The women in the video expressed comfort in knowing that so many others share their struggle.

Background

In our society, women get the message that a "perfect" body can yield happiness, success and even love. The results can be devastating. Poor self-esteem, eating disorders, self-mutilation and even suicide are some of the consequences of a poor body image.

While experts agree that media play a large part in the development of body image, self-image begins forming long before children see their first television program or magazine layout. It is often shaped by the seemingly innocuous comment or the lingering stare of the people closest to her . . . parent, teacher, classmate, or friend. The problem is part of a larger problem that needs a framework with which people can begin discussing this complex and painful issue.

Research

- Parents' encouragement of their daughter to lose weight has a positive correlation with the daughter's weight, desire to be thinner and dieting efforts (Thelen & Cormier, 1995).
- A study of 36,000 students in Minnesota found that negative body image is associated with suicide risk for girls (AAUW, 1990).
- Eating disorders are not just a problem among the wealthy and the White. Studies have shown that eating disorders also occur amongst women in lower SES groups (Story, French, Resnick & Blum, 1995). Eighty-nine percent of women surveyed want to lose weight (Garner, 1997).

- African-American women are as likely to be at risk for eating disorders as their White counterparts (Pumariega, Gustavson, Gustavson, Stone Motes & Ayers, 1994).
- In a study of 9 and 10 year old girls, 40% of girls wanted to lose weight, regardless of their ethnicity (Schreiber, Robins, Striegel-Moore, Obarzanek, Morrison & Wright, 1996).
- Men and women's magazines were reviewed for ads and articles concerning weight loss. Compared to the men's magazines, the women's magazines had 10.5 more content related to weight loss (Andersen & DiDomenico, 1992).
- Women who are attracted to thin media personalities have a higher drive for thinness, anorexia, bulimia, and perfectionism (Harrison, 1997).
- Women with lower self-esteem are more likely to report "feeling fat" (Tiggemann, 1996).

The Participants

Holly:

A self-described fat woman, Holly often feels alienated by a weight-obsessed society.

Megan:

To be truly happy, Megan believes her body must be perfect.

Thendara:

Despite her ability to analyze the sources of her anorexia, Thendara can't seem to escape the illness.

Rene:

Since recovering from bulimia, Rene has shared her story with other young people.

Shavon:

Shavon expresses the struggle of being a black woman in society that deems white the cultural ideal.

Tiffany:

At age fifteen, Tiffany blamed her body for being raped. Now, she talks about her frustration with a society that objectifies women.

Marivi:

With every tilt of the scale, Marivi struggles to accept her body. She speaks of the difficulty of living in a world where one's body is everyone's business.

Video Synopsis

The video opens with the retreat participants making brief statements about their images of the ideal body. This is followed by an introduction to the video and the issue of women's body image in American society.

Section 1: Cultural Ideals (Time: 5 min.)

The group discussion begins with the women answering the question "What is the ideal image of a woman's body in our culture?"

Section 2: Body Representation (Time: 3 min)

Dr. Wolf asks the women whether they could find images of their own bodies in mass media, a request many of them found challenging, leading them to discuss the issue of exclusion.

Section 3: Feelings and Sources (Time: 9 min.)

During this segment, the participants discuss the importance of parents, teachers, doctors, and others who have influenced their feelings about their bodies. They also discuss how these feelings have affected their relationships and other important life choices.

Section 4: Food (Time: 5 min.)

All the women express strong feelings about food.

Section 5: Media (Time: 3 min.)

The discussion is brought back to the issue of media and its effect on body image. Shavon and Marivi, both women of color, discuss the difficulty of finding meaningful representations in mass media.

Section 6: Solutions (Time: 2 min.)

The participants talk about media literacy and how parents and authority figures can help young girls to develop a positive body image. The participants express relief and amazement about their common experiences as women.

Pre-Screening

The following steps will help prepare you for a public screening:

1. Watch the video yourself before showing it to your viewers. You may have strong feelings about the subject and it is helpful to deal with these issues before you encourage others to discuss their own reactions
2. Think about your objectives for showing the tape. What do you want your viewers to know or do as a result of watching the program? How does the video fit into your curriculum? Knowing the answers to these questions will help you achieve your classroom or personal goals.
3. Prepare the location in which your audience will view the tape. If you plan on initiating a discussion, create an open space by placing chairs in a circle. Also, make sure the video is visible and audible to all audience members.
4. Prepare your students by providing them with background information on body image and explaining your objectives for showing it in class.
5. Be prepared for emotional reactions from audience members. These reactions can range from anger and frustration to relief. Be ready to provide viewers with resources to help them deal with their feelings or explore the topic further.

6. Lead a pre-screening discussion. While boys and men in our culture are body conscious, they do not always understand or empathize with the struggles that women face by simply living in a culture that projects a very narrow image of beauty. Depending on the audience, special consideration should be given to preparing boys and younger men for the video.

7. The video is designed for interactive viewing. Pause the tape to ask questions. Use the "Video Synopsis" to help you plan when to pause the tape for discussion.

Post-Screening

After the tape is finished, keep the lights dimmed to give viewers time to gather their thoughts and prepare themselves for discussion. Make note of any students who are visibly affected by the film. If appropriate, offer them the chance to leave the room so they can deal with their feelings. Set a time limit for discussion with the class. This will help keep the discussion on topic and allow you to tactfully bring the discussion back if it veers away from the intended topic. You may find it helpful to first share your own personal feelings about the video so as to encourage students to share their feelings.

Discussion Questions

The following questions were used with the participants in *Body Image: The Quest for Perfection*. If time is short, you might wish to condense the questions. You might want to first ask students to cut out magazine examples of the cultural ideal, their own ideal and representations of their own bodies.

Cultural Ideals

- What is the ideal image of a woman's body in our culture? In your mind?
- What are the common images of women's bodies in TV, film, magazines, billboards, etc?
- What women have what you consider the 'ideal body'? Why?
- In the video, what were some of the words used to describe the ideal body? What words do you or others use to describe the ideal body?
- Did all the women in the video express a desire for these culturally ideal bodies? Were they ever critical of these bodies?

Body Representation

- Have you seen your body represented in mass media? If so, where and in what ways?
- How is your body excluded from the media?

Feelings about your body

- When do you recall becoming sensitive to your feelings about your body?
- How have your feelings about your body evolved over time?
- How have your feelings affected the way you interact with men? Women?
- How have your feelings affected your career choices? Clothing choices? Eating behavior?
- How do you feel about your body today?

Sources of these feelings

- What are the sources of your feelings about your body (media, parents, authority, relationships)?

- What have you said or done that might have affected a girl/woman's feelings about her body?

Moving towards self-acceptance

- How can we learn to begin to accept our bodies?
- What can we help others accept their bodies?
- What can we do as a society?
- What would have to change in our society to make it easier for us to accept our bodies.

General questions about the video

- Which woman did you most identify with? Why?
- What did you relate to in the video?
- Are there any parts of the video with which you didn't relate?
- How might being on camera have changed the reactions/responses of the participants?
- What part of the video most affected you?
- Did you learn anything new about body image?
- What was left out of the video?
- What made you uncomfortable in the video?

*These questions were used in Dr. Wolf's research on body image. See "References" for more information.

Activities

Group Work

Break students into groups. Have them come up with two to three possible solutions to the body image crisis.

Expert Discussion

Invite body image "experts" like therapists, doctors and media literacy experts to talk to your class.

Think Paper

Ask students to write a "think-feel paper" in which they list their thoughts about the video and then describe their feelings about it.

Observation

Ask students to observe/document comments they hear from both people they know and don't know concerning body size or appearance.

Media Diary

Ask students to keep a media diary in which they document the media they watch, read, view or listen to. Ask them to describe the feelings associated with each media "incident."

Photo Essay

Ask students to create a photo essay portraying a wide variety of bodies. Have them write a brief bio to accompany each photo that uses nonappearance related descriptions.

Role-Play

Ask students to role-play various situations in which the issue of body image might come up such as a teen visiting a doctor or a mother confronting her bulimic daughter.

Journaling

Ask students to keep a journal in which they answer the following questions:

- Imagine that, from this day on, your body and appearance will always be as it is today and you will never achieve the ideal for which you strive. How does this make you feel?
- Imagine that you never go on another diet from this day forward. How does this make you feel? How would your life be different?
- Do you put food into good/bad categories? What kind of food is good? What kind of food is bad? How do you feel when you've eaten "bad" food?
- What three messages about your appearance do you most often give yourself? What three messages do you most often get from the people around you? Who sends these messages? How do these messages make you feel? Think about each message and write an argument as to why the message is true or untrue.

Resources

Books

The Body Project by Joan Jacobs Brumberg
Vintage Books, 1998

Reviving Ophelia by Mary Pipher
Ballantine Books, 1995

Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia by Marya Hornbacher
Harpercollins, 1998
Exacting Beauty: Theory, Assessment, and Treatment of

Body Image Disturbance by J. Kevin Thompson, Leslie J. Heinberg, Madeline N. Altabe, Stacey Tantleff-Dunn
American Psychological Association, 1999

Don't Diet, Live-It! by Marsea Marcus, Andre LoBue
Gurze Designs & Books, 1999

The Way of the Journal by Kathleen Adams
Sidran, 1998

A Hunger So Wide and So Deep by Becky W. Thompson
University of Minnesota Press, 1994

Body Image: Understanding Body Dissatisfaction in Men, Women and Children by Sarah Grogan
Routledge, 1999

Looking Queer: Body Image and Identity in Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay and Transgender

Communities by Dawn Atkins
Harrington Park Press, 1998

Web Sites

www.bodyimagesite.com

* The companion web site for this video.

Adbusters Media Foundation

www.adbusters.org

* a media literacy web site and magazine.

The Just Think Foundation

www.justthink.org

* Provides young people with tools for critical thinking.

About Face

www.about-face.org

* Focuses on the effect that mass media have on the well being of women and girls.

www.somethingfishy.org

* A comprehensive web site providing information and resources on eating disorders.

Organizations

The Girls Figure In Program

National Organization for Women (NOW)

(415) 861-8880

*A program that discusses issues such as body image, self-esteem and media literacy with high school girls.

The International No Diet Coalition Council on Size &

Weight Discrimination

(914) 679-1209

The eating disorder referral and information center

(858)-792-7463

www.edreferral.com

Family Resources for Education on Eating Disorders

(301) 585-0358

<http://cpcug.org/user/rpike/freed.html>

Overeaters Anonymous

(505)-891-2664

www.overeatersanonymous.org

National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance

(800) 442-1214

<http://naafa.org/>

*Advocacy group promoting size acceptance.

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