

“Ideal Not Real” Body Image Activity

Recommended Age: 12+

Goal

- To explore body image issues.
- To explore how youth are affected by body image issues.
- To demonstrate how ‘ideal’ bodies (stereotypes) in the media set unrealistic standards.

Have Ready

- Two large pieces of flipchart paper and markers.
- Write “What Beautiful Means to Me” on two flipcharts.

Instructions

- Ask youth, “**What is body image?**” How you see yourself, not what you actually look like.
- Divide the class into two groups. Have one group draw the ‘ideal’ male body (the stereotypes) while the other group draws what the ‘ideal’ female body (the stereotypes) is supposed to look like. Be sure to mention that there are more genders (trans, agender, non-binary, etc.) and expressions than just men and women; media typically only portrays people in the gender binary (man/woman, masculine/feminine).
- Ask youth, “**What does the media tell us the ‘ideal’ female/male body should look like?**” Tell them to have as much fun as possible with their drawing, but that it is not supposed to be what they find most attractive or valuable about people.
- Have them also write or draw other characteristics of this person, such as what they are supposed to like to do, wear, eat, and act like.
- Have them choose one or two people to present their drawing.

- The drawings will most likely have some of the following: Girls: lots of makeup, thin, big breasts and butt, white teeth, jewelry, blond long hair, white skin, be passive, have \$\$, etc. Guys: muscular, no body hair, tanned (if white skin), defined abs, big penis, have \$\$, aggressive, white teeth, be tough, etc.

Debrief

- Ask youth, **“Where do we learn about these expectations from?”** This discussion usually includes sources such as **media**, social media, and celebrities, but could also include community specific examples, ideals, and identities. **A lot of pressure to look a certain way comes from the media. “Do most people in our community or the world look like this? What’s missing?”** Different ethnicities, different abilities (e.g., people using wheelchairs), different body sizes, personalities, etc.
- **“Are these images we get in media realistic?”** No. **“So then what’s going on with the images that we see that’s unrealistic?”** Photoshop, photo-editing apps, personal trainers and chefs, airbrushing, hair and makeup artists, etc. A very small portion of our society looks like the types of bodies that we often see in the media. **If we compare ourselves to unrealistic standards, it can be easy to be critical of our own bodies and not appreciate them for all their gifts.** When we become so focused on the appearance of our body, we can forget that our body is instrumental in everything we do. Our bodies allow us to get from place to place, to do the things we like to do, and to live.
- **Remind youth that these stereotypes are trying to sell an image or products to make a profit by encouraging us to change our natural beauty.**
- Remind youth that media is supposed to be entertainment, not real life, and that social media is supposed to be a tool for connecting with friends and having fun. If they’re following something that doesn’t promote their overall health, wellbeing, or creativity, then encourage them to unfollow it.¹ Replace it with people and stories that make them feel good about themselves and others.
- Asking youth in two groups to brainstorm “What beauty means to me” on a flipchart can close this activity nicely.

Additional Activities

Ideally, this activity should be followed by:

- Body Image Action Planning Activity
- Body Image Discussion Cards
- Body Image Boosters

WOWPresents. (2016, September 12). *UNHhhh Ep 22: "Social Media" w/ Trixie Mattel & Katya Zamolodchikova*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eN9ce0EVD2o>

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