

# Body Image Discussion Cards

**Recommended Age: 12+**

## Goal

- To discuss body image issues.
- To identify the connections between discrimination and negative body image.

## Have Ready

- Discussion cards. For younger groups, you may want to do 3-4 cards, and for older groups, 5-6 cards. This depends on group size too.

## Instructions

- Hand out cards and ask youth to talk about their card in small groups.
- After a few minutes, bring the classroom back together. Ask each group to read their card and share their thoughts. Ask the rest of the classroom if they agree or have anything to add.
- Share key talking points (below).

## Cards and Debrief

### Why can't people control getting pimples?

- **What causes pimples?** A hormone called androgen plays a role in acne.<sup>i</sup> Among other things, androgen stimulates the oil glands in the skin. When the oil glands are over-stimulated by the androgen hormone, people can get breakouts. **Hormones are a common part of puberty, and so are pimples.**
- What do people mean by 'taking proper care of their skin'? Washing, not eating the 'wrong' foods. Over-washing your face can irritate the skin and oil glands and can cause more breakouts. It's better to wash gently with a mild fragrance-free soap twice a day.<sup>ii</sup> You may have heard that

certain foods cause acne or make it worse, but there's no scientific evidence to back up these claims.<sup>iii</sup>

- Many people with ovaries notice that they get more pimples around the time of their menstrual periods. This is due to the increase in hormone production in the body. Estimates show that 63% of people experience an increase in pimples (up to 25% more) during pre-menstruation.<sup>iv</sup>

### **How are fat bodies discriminated against in our society? How can we all be more inclusive?**

- **This is a type of discrimination called fatphobia (also referred to as fat-shaming) that is often reinforced by the media. The fact that our society considers the word 'fat' an insult shows us that fatphobia exists.**
- **People often treat thin or muscular people better than they do fat people.**
- We know that fatphobic/shaming comments are actually discrimination. This means that, like other types of discrimination, it is not okay. Because we don't often hear fatphobia talked about like this in our society, people may not realize this.
- If there is a fat person in the media, which is rare, often they are in comedy roles as opposed to serious ones. We rarely see serious sex scenes. We know that in real life, people who are fat can have happy/healthy sex lives; however, this is rarely portrayed in the media. This, in part, creates and contributes to fatphobia.
- Some examples of how we can all be more inclusive are to not laugh at or make fat jokes, speak up when we hear the word fat being labelled as bad, use the word fat neutrally or positively, don't comment on people's weight (gains, losses, or present place), and seek out and share media that celebrates all bodies.
- Note: If youth bring up skinny-shaming, discuss how it is never okay to shame someone based on their body size, but fatphobia also happens at a systemic level. You can use the Defining Oppression activity from the Diversity and Anti-Oppression chapter to explain the difference.
- FYI: The fear of being fat is so overwhelming that some young girls have indicated in surveys that they are more afraid of becoming fat than they are of cancer, nuclear war, or losing their parents.<sup>v</sup>

- FYI: These fat-phobic attitudes can lead to discrimination. For example, research has repeatedly shown that weight affects teacher evaluations, admissions into higher education, personnel decisions, landlord decisions about tenants, and assessments by medical and mental health personnel and employers.<sup>vi</sup>

### **Why can restricting or limiting the amount or types of food you eat be unhealthy?**

- Food not only fuels our body, but also our minds. Dieting can impact our mental health, including our mood and our stress levels.
- Puberty is a time of many changes, including weight changes. It is normal to gain weight, as our bodies are still growing. At this time, bodies require a lot of energy, including nutritious foods to fuel both the body and brain. Restricting food is especially problematic when a body is rapidly growing and demanding food to help with hormone levels, concentration, brain development, etc. Fad diets aimed at building muscle or losing weight often do not provide us with a balance of nutrients that our bodies need.
- Diets overwhelmingly fail to help people stay thin. Of those who lose 25 or more pounds, over 95% will gain that weight back and more.<sup>vii</sup> When you lose weight really fast and then gain it back, and then lose it fast again (yo-yo dieting), it puts a lot of stress on your heart and other vital organs.
- FYI: Yo-yo dieting is extremely hard on the body. Yo-yo dieters are twice as likely to develop type II diabetes and cardiovascular disease compared to people who remain fat. Dieting (where the sole motivation is weight loss) starves your mind and body. It has been proven to lead to binge eating, the body's natural response to deprivation, it slows down our metabolism so that the body cannot process nutrients efficiently, and it can lead to many health issues.

### **How can advertising from the fitness and diet industry negatively impact our wellbeing?**

- **The diet industry focuses on making money, not helping people. One of the big ways they do this is to make people question their body and their worth.** They often hire social media influencers and celebrities to talk about their product, without acknowledging the

sponsorship. In reality, most of these people don't use their products off-camera.

- **If the diet industry actually cared about people's health, it would be sending us different messages.** Those messages might be things like beauty is diverse and comes in many body shapes, sizes, and colours. We are all beautiful in our own ways. Health is not only about our outside appearance, but includes many things like the food we eat, the activities we enjoy, the supportive people in our lives, and the way we feel about ourselves.
- **In Canada alone, the diet industry is worth about \$7 billion a year.**<sup>viii</sup> On a global scale, it's worth hundreds of billions of dollars. These businesses send us tons of messages through TV, magazines, social media, ads, etc. that tell us that we are not good enough. Their goal is to encourage us to buy their products that will 'fix our problem(s).' What if other industries had a failure rate of 95%?<sup>ix</sup> Imagine if airplanes only worked 5% of the time? It's unlikely that we would use airplanes as often and the industry would have to change to have a higher success rate.
- The diet industry makes false claims and attacks our self-worth to make us buy their products. They label products as 'healthy' and use social media, commercials, and celebrities to convince us we need their products to feel happy.

### **How can social media affect the way we see ourselves?**

- Social media can negatively impact our self-esteem, particularly if how many likes or views we get motivates us. This can make us question why we didn't get as many likes – "I guess I don't actually look that good, etc."
- People may compare themselves to others (lives and bodies).
- Photoshop and other apps often manipulate images we see in social media.
- On the other hand, sometimes it can make you feel great to post a picture of yourself or your life.
- **Social media also allows us to find other body-accepting communities and people (e.g., body-acceptance, fat-positive communities) that we don't see in regular media.** This can give us control over what kind of media we see.

## How can weight loss or muscle gain products be risky for our health?

- **Supplements and weight loss pills have recommended doses that are not usually made for growing/changing teen bodies.** In particular, the impacts of supplements like creatine on developing bodies are unknown. It may have lasting negative effects on bone development. Doctors recommend waiting until you're older before using it.
- **Some products change our moods and our energy levels, and that can get in the way of things we need to do, like sleep, go to school, work, maintain our relationships, etc.**
- If people use anything with the hope of enhancing their performance or changing their body size, are they likely to take only the recommended amount? No. They are likely to use more than the recommended amount. Going above dosage amounts can be dangerous.
- Talked about as natural, but when used without the support of a healthcare provider, steroids such as testosterone may have health risks including blood pressure changes, aggression, heart problems, and infection when injecting
- FYI: Long-term use of creatine has been shown to damage the liver and kidney functions. Using it while the body is still developing (like in the teen years) may affect how the organs might work over time. The medical community does not recommend it.

## Weight charts online and in doctors' offices often label people as 'healthy' or 'unhealthy.' What is the problem with this? What are better ways to measure health?

- **Weight charts, like BMI, do not take into account genetics, muscle mass, activity levels, stress, etc. They also don't adjust for taller people or shorter people.**
- **The Body Mass Index was never intended to be a measure of an individual's health, but as a tool for a mathematician to estimate population averages. It was never designed for health.** Doctors only started using it at the insistence of private health insurance companies as a tool for denying people care.<sup>x</sup>

- **Health is about how you feel and how your body works, not about a number on a scale.**
- **Everyone has a natural healthy weight range and body size. Those weights and sizes are different for everyone.** Studies have shown that people can live long and healthy lives at any body size, as long as they are eating nutritious food, caring for themselves, and moving their bodies in ways that feel good for them.<sup>xi</sup>
- **Everyone can make healthy choices that include body movement, but that is not about weight loss.** For example, light exercise can sometimes reduce feelings of stress and anxiety without changes in body weight.
- FYI: Having a high BMI has been exaggerated as a risk factor and wrongly considered as a cause of ill health and early death. In 91% of the cases of whether someone is in poor health or not, it has nothing to do with their BMI rating. This means that whether someone is in poor health or not, there is a 9% chance that it might relate to their BMI rating.<sup>xii</sup> Someone's BMI rating has very little to do with how healthy they are or will be in the future.

### How does racism in the media affect body image?

- **The media affects how we live our lives, how we see other people, and how we think about ourselves.** If we don't see ourselves represented, then we may start to question if we matter. If we only see stereotypes of groups, then we may start to believe and act on them.
- Western media focuses on people with lighter or white skin and features. This informs the beauty standards in our society and teaches us that white skin is what's considered to be 'normal' and other skin colours are 'exotic'. **None of the 'ideals' we see celebrate the diversity of beauty around the world and often exclude people of colour.**
- If there are brown/black people being portrayed in the media, they often have features similar to white people (e.g., lighter skin).
- **These beauty standards are a result of the history of racism on this land (and many others).** People who hold the most power within our society determine the physical characteristics considered to be the most desirable.

- Other cultures have been changing their beauty ideals to follow American/European beauty trends. We see skin-bleaching products being sold, and people of colour trying to prevent their skin from looking its natural colour.
- FYI: Skin-whitening products may make someone's skin look lighter in appearance. These products have shown to be harmful in that they often contain skin-irritating chemicals, including corticosteroids, hydroquinone, and mercury. The British Skin Foundation advises that hydroquinone can cause intense irritation and uneven bleaching of the skin, and mercury can cause increased pigmentation and severe itchy rashes.<sup>xiii</sup> In 2017, the global skin-lightening industry was worth \$4.8 billion, with a projected growth of \$8.9 billion by 2027.<sup>xiv</sup>

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