Body image in adolescence and beyond: A public health perspective on why it matters and what can be done about it

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Body dissatisfaction is regarded as one of the strongest predictors of eating disorders and disordered eating behaviors. Yet, historically, some have felt that some body dissatisfaction may be a “good thing” in light of the increasing prevalence of obesity as it could serve as a motivator for healthier behaviors. This presentation summarized key findings from the longitudinal study, Project EAT (Eating and Activity in Adolescents and Young Adults) with regard to body dissatisfaction. The motivation, history, and some of the nuts and bolts of the study were described. The presentation included data on the prevalence of body dissatisfaction and other weight-related problems among young people during different stages of adolescence and young adulthood. Predictors of body dissatisfaction such as exposure to weight teasing/harassment, peer and family weight-focused environments, higher BMI in societies that value thinness, and psychosocial variables were discussed. Additionally, Dr. Neumark-Sztainer presented consequences of body dissatisfaction and its relevance for both eating disorders and obesity. Data was shown that dispels the myth that body dissatisfaction serves as a motivator toward positive behavioral change. In fact, body dissatisfaction was only found to predict potentially harmful outcomes, with no evidence that it served as a motivator for healthier ones. Finally, strategies for improving body image such as familial interventions, recommendations for health care providers, school wide interventions, and the use of mind-body practices such as yoga were discussed.