Many adolescent girls face psychological struggles. For example, eating disorders disproportionately affect adolescent girls compared to the rest of the population. Approximately 40 percent of anorexia nervosa cases occur in females ages fifteen to nineteen. The prevalence of this disorder is of special concern given that the mortality rate for anorexia nervosa is more than twelve times greater than the annual death rate due to all causes of death for girls ages fifteen to twenty-four years in the general population. Depression also disproportionately affects adolescent girls. Although boys tend to have higher rates of depression than girls during childhood, sometime in adolescence a switch occurs. Girls’ rates of depression during adolescence are twice as high as boys’, a trend that continues throughout adulthood. Importantly, depression is also a significant risk factor for suicide attempts. Bae et al. also found the rate of attempted suicide to be 17.1 percent for adolescent females as compared to 10.2 percent in adolescent males. Clearly, adolescence poses significant psychological hazards for females. These gender differences do not occur in a vacuum; they are largely the result of sociocultural factors. The media and other cultural forces play an important role in body image and depression in adolescent girls.

**Media images of thinness**

Negative body image in adolescent girls is of growing concern in modern Western societies. As girls go through puberty, their bodies gain adipose and move farther away from the thin ideal for women. One must only take a look at a fashion magazine to see how the current ideal body is often asexual and childlike. Such a medium influences these girls and often causes them to become dissatisfied with their appearance.

Experiments have demonstrated the detrimental effects media have on adolescent females’ body image. Clay, Vignoles, and Dittmar presented magazine images to young adolescent girls. Two groups viewed magazine covers with female models who were either underweight or a little below average weight, while a third group viewed covers with inanimate objects. The researchers found that viewing the magazines with the models resulted in decreased reports of body satisfaction and, subsequently, self-esteem. They also found an age trend: awareness and internalization of societial standards of attractiveness increased with age, whereas body satisfaction and self-esteem decreased. This reveals how, in adolescent girls, increasing acceptance of cultural standards may lead to dissatisfaction with and rejection of themselves.

Other studies have reported similar findings. Sinton and Birch found that, even in girls as young as eleven years of age, awareness of media messages is associated with higher body dissatisfaction scores. A meta-analysis by Groesz, Levine, and Murnen examined twenty-five studies on the impact of experimental presentation of thin media images on body satisfaction. The review found that viewing thin models, as opposed to average-sized or overweight models or inanimate objects, consistently leads to decreases in body satisfaction in women. Of note is that this effect was even greater among females less than nineteen years of age. The authors concluded that these results support the idea that mass media promote a slender ideal that has negative effects on the body images of women. Indeed, if such negative effects are found after briefly viewing a few images, one can conclude that living in a culture inundated with images and messages endorsing a thin ideal will have detrimental effects on female youth.

The significance of the impact of media on the body images of adolescent girls extends to more serious eating disordered attitudes and behaviors. Indeed, a study by Ata, Ludden, and Lally found that adolescent girls scoring in the high-risk category for negative eating behaviors and attitudes were differentiated from those in the low-risk category by reports of more media pressure. Significantly, this was not a factor in distinguishing risk groups in males, thus showing that media images disproportionately affect the eating behaviors of females. Adolescent girls’ internalization of the thin ideal leads to body dissatisfaction, which in turn puts them at risk for serious eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa.

**Objectification of the body**

In addition to pressures to be thin, Western culture also promotes the objectification of women. This encourages women to take an observer’s view of their bodies. Roberts and Gettman revealed the extent to which this objectification has been internalized by showing that merely reading words concerning the body’s physical appearance induced a state of self-objectification in women. These women reported significantly higher levels of body shame and appearance anxiety compared to men. This shows how culture interacts with gender to produce negative effects for women’s self-evaluations.

Unfortunately, objectification is not limited to only adult women, but extends to adolescent girls as well. Self-objectification not only affects body image, but may also lead to depression. Grabe et al. showed that body shame and rumination mediate the link between self-objectification and depression in adolescent girls. In this study, gender differences in self-objectification appeared before gender differences in depression, adding further evidence to the directional link between self-objectification and depression in adolescent girls.

**Spirituality a positive influence**

Although there is need for a complete cultural overhaul of the media and of the way society views women and encourages them...
to view themselves, small steps can be taken to affect the mental health of adolescent girls positively. Religion and spirituality can have a positive effect on both body image and depression. Boyatzis, Kline, and Backof conducted an experiment similar to those mentioned above in which women viewed media images of thin women. However, in this study, women who read Christian-based affirmations of God’s love and acceptance of their bodies before viewing the images reported that they felt more positive about their appearance compared to women who did not read such statements. A review of the literature found that many indices of religiosity are positively associated with women’s body image. Also, theistic treatments (therapies drawing on a client’s spirituality or religious background) for eating disorders are being used efficaciously.

The relational aspect of faith in God seems especially promising to improving the mental health of adolescent girls. Another study by Boyatzis found that a scale for relationship with God was positively associated with body image and eating attitudes in women. Desrosiers and Miller found that relational spirituality is inversely related to depression in adolescent girls. Emphasizing a relationship with a merciful, accepting God could also help reduce the perfectionism that has come to be recognized as a significant component in anorexia nervosa. Thus, it seems that encouraging a relationship with God may reduce negative body image and depressive symptomatology in young women.

Modern culture propagates a thin ideal and self-objectification for all women, but adolescent girls seem to be especially susceptible to such influences. These damaging cultural effects impact the mental health of adolescent girls in ways that may not only affect their wellbeing, but could also lead to death due to suicide and/or the effects of eating disorders. The media should take responsibility for the images they produce and begin to promote a healthier ideal and more positive views of women. Christian spirituality holds hope for the psychological health of adolescent girls. Having an intimate relationship with God can serve as a buffer against negative cultural effects.

Notes