Body Image Disturbances, the Media and the Adolescent Girl

Counseling Strategies and Adlerian Concepts

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Abstract

Body Image Disturbances may appear when an adolescent girl’s self-evaluation of her appearance interferes with her physical and mental health. Media exposure profoundly affects the stereotyping of the perfect body, resulting in a multitude of body image disturbances. For the impressionable adolescent girl, this is particularly true. This paper investigates the impact of the media on adolescent female body image. The relationship between body image and the Adlerian concepts of striving for significance, feelings and mistaken beliefs, goals of misbehavior, and inferiority will be discussed. Practical strategies for school counselors will also be provided.
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My nose is too big. My eyes are too close together. I’m too fat. I’m too skinny. I wish I had longer legs. I’d be happier if I were taller, shorter, had blue eyes, blonde hair and dimples.

All teens are concerned about how they look. They want to be attractive and they want to fit in with others. Meeting society’s standards for looking good is not always easy, especially for girls. Girls are judged by their appearance more than boys, and the standards are high (Enotes, 2010). Physical attractiveness in females is based on pretty features, a good complexion, nice hair, and a well-proportioned body. Today, however, “well-proportioned” is popularly interpreted to mean “thin.” As a result, many teenage girls are unhappy with their bodies. This is especially true of those who, because of pressures or problems in their own lives, become fixated on body image as a way of achieving success or happiness (Enotes, 2010).

Adolescence marks a time of rapid and intense emotional and physical changes. During adolescence, there is tremendous pressure placed on the value of peer acceptance and peer approval. It is a time of heightened awareness to external influences and social messages about cultural norms. During this developmental phase, as youths begin to focus more on their physical appearance, body image and related self-concepts emerge as significant factors associated with health and well-being. The media strongly influences how adolescents formulate and define their body image ideals and subsequent self-comparisons (National Association of Social Workers, 2010).
Social influences, which include the media and popular mainstream culture, promote specific images and standards of beauty and attractiveness. These images and standards contradict good health practices and one’s ability to achieve a specific body type or image. Western society places great value on looks and exalts images unachievable by most people (National Association of Social Workers, 2010). For example, Katherine Schwarzenegger, in her book *Rock What You’ve Got* (2010) provided factual evidence that “the average fashion model is over six feet tall and weighs well under 120 pounds.” Katherine goes on to say that in actuality, “the average American woman is five feet four inches and weighs 140 pounds and that less than 5 percent of all women have the body type they see in magazines…” (p. 23). It is common for girls to feel pressure to measure up to the high expectations that have been set by outside influences that contribute to a negative body image.

**Body Image Disturbances Defined**

In order to fully comprehend the effects of media on body image among adolescent girls, it is important to define body image. Most experts believe pressures to be perfect are important reasons why so many adolescent girls develop body image disturbances, (BID). BID essentially manifests through two venues: internal and external or, more precisely, through disturbances in mental health and physical health. Nathanson and Botta (2003) define BID as a result of when an individual’s feelings, perceptions, and opinions about his/her body become confused or troubled. In the book “Taking Charge of My Mind & Body,” Folkers and Engelmann (1997) describe BID as the individual’s perception of self versus the individual’s reality of self. For example: “You may think you know what you look like, but your picture of yourself probably doesn’t match
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reality” (p. 107). Even if you’re a healthy, normal weight, most girls will probably look in the mirror and believe they are fat or ugly. This endless pursuit of flawlessness has become a life long cycle for many.

The internal or mental health effects of BID can lead to obsessive striving for perfection, low self-esteem, depression, conflicts over issues of control, family problems, discomfort with a changing body, and psychological or social traumas such as sexual promiscuity (Enotes, 2010). Sometimes young girls become so concerned with their body image that it can take over most other aspects of their lives.

The external or physical health effects of BID can lead to behavioral disorders. Health professionals recognize three types of BID. One is compulsive eating, or binge eating. A compulsive eater eats large quantities of food, or binges, even when not physically hungry. The second type is anorexia nervosa, in which a person has an irrational fear of getting fat and diets to the point of starvation. The third type of eating disorder is bulimia. A girl dealing with bulimia eats large quantities of food and then makes herself throw up, takes laxatives, or uses other ways to avoid gaining weight.

Many people hope that, by working together, teenagers, parents, teachers, and counselors can bring about positive change in the perception of body image. The first step to understanding how change will occur is to better understand how the media affects body image.

Existing Studies that Link Effects of Media to Body Image

Abramson & Valene et al’s findings (as cited in Becker, 2004) note that numerous observational and experimental studies exist and have shown the link between reported media exposure and changes in body image. Feingold & Mazzella’s study (as cited in
Jones, Vigfusdottir, & Lee, 2004) reported that the majority of the research emphasizes that body discontentment is more common among females who watch more television.

An ample amount of evidence exists regarding the effect of the mass media on girls. Little research on the effect of the media on boy’s body image exists (Field, Camargo, Taylor, Berkey, Roberts, & Colditz, 2001). However, a considerable and informative literature on boys' body image has begun to emerge (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003). Body image issues for boys have focused on increasing weight and shoulder/muscular shape. Due to the greater cultural pressure to attend to appearance current studies reveal girls compared to boys indicate greater levels of internalization of ideal images portrayed in favorite magazines.

Hill et al.’s study (as cited in Champion & Furnham, 1999) revealed that research focuses mostly on female body image issues due to the problem that girls as young as nine years old experience dissatisfaction with their body shapes. How does this occur?

Folkers and Engelmann (1997) state: “It’s really a combination of factors” (pg. 107). When describing these variables, the authors used an example of a girl going through puberty. Youths feel insecure about their changing bodies during puberty or adolescence. As the girl pages through fashion magazines or watches TV, the articles and the ads tell her that being thin is “in.” This thin-is-in mentality may motivate her to begin a diet, and that first diet is often enough to begin BID. Folkers and Engelmann describe how achieving the “perfect” body is a multi-million-dollar industry involving fitness, cosmetics, and diet programs. Many girls and young women end up measuring themselves against the unrealistic ideals offered by the media. The result, state Folkers and Engelmann, is a negative body image.
Many girls grow up believing that in order to be successful they need to live up to society’s ideal of beauty and physical attractiveness. To them, they believe they need the “ideal” to be popular, to have friends, and to attract boyfriends. This belief can lead girls to become obsessed with appearances such as: clothing, skin, hair, makeup, jewelry, mannerisms, and especially weight and body size. In addition, Follers and Engelmann, (1997) state that certain careers and activities common to women put emphasis on fitness, weight, size, and shape. Because adolescence is a time when girls naturally dream about their future careers, living up to society’s ideal becomes even more innate. Dancers, actresses, athletes, models, and gymnasts often fixate on their weight and physical appearance. Adolescent girls become even more vulnerable to developing BID. Two theories that support how an adolescent girl can be influenced by perceptions of BID exist. One is the sociocultural theory and the other is called the social comparison theory.

**Sociocultural Theory Defined**

The development and everlasting effect of BID has generally been portrayed through the sociocultural theory (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2002). Sociocultural theory maintains that an adolescent’s parents, friends, and the media all play significant roles in influencing body image and body changes (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003). The sociocultural approach prominently occurs in research on the development of BID. The basic concept of this approach suggests that societal factors have a powerful impact on the development and maintenance of body image. This approach is based on the creation of a culture that values, reinforces, and models ideals of beauty and body shape through appearance or appearance culture. Central elements of the “appearance culture” identified
as powerful forces shaping appearance standards include media images of the sociocultural approach (Jones et al., 2004).

Two aspects of peer relationships that contribute to internalization and body image exist in present research. These are appearance conversations with friends and appearance criticism from peers. Conversations with friends about appearance can be especially influential because of the increased intimacy in friendships during adolescence and the importance of close friendships in shaping the social context of adolescents (Jones et al., 2004). Peer appearance criticism not only generates a direct and potent experience with negative evaluation of one’s own body by another, but it also potentially contributes to internalization by reflecting important features of the appearance culture among peers. Ultimately, direct critical comments from peers have a decided impact on students’ feelings about their bodies (Jones et al., 2004).

Research has shown that adolescents who have played a role in daily appearance conversations and criticisms have a greater internalization of appearance ideals. These ideals lead to increased feelings of disappointment with one’s self image (Jones et al., 2004).

Social Comparison Theory Defined

Studies have estimated that social comparison theory (SCT) is another predictor of weight anxiety and body dissatisfaction (Tiggemann, 2005; Jones et al., 2004). SCT hypothesizes that individuals will make automatic comparisons about their bodies with a single image presented in the media and will then believe that the images represent rational, reasonable goals (Botta, 2000). Adolescent girls exposed to idealized female
images directly made comparisons to their own bodies and subsequently changed their body satisfaction (Durkin, Paxton, & Sorbello, 2007).

SCT associates the connection between how an adolescent girl interprets what she sees, her attitudes, and her behavior in relation to her body (Tiggemann, 2005). This connection could account for an increased motivation in BID, eating disordered behaviors and an increased drive for thinness (Botta, 1999). Wood and Taylor’s study (as cited in Botta, 1999) found that the body comparisons a girl makes help to verify a belief in being thin and her need to act on that belief. This is particularly true when she is highly driven to achieve a goal. SCT also supports the notion that not all individuals who watch a lot of television develop BID (Botta, 1999). Only those who engage in goal-directed behavior comparisons and see those standards as attainable will engage in BID (Botta, 1999).

Keating’s research (as cited in Botta, 1999) suggests that adolescent girls exposed to BID may not have reached the cognitive level to process information. After making these comparisons with the images portrayed in the media, teenage girls strive for and carry out new expectations and goals (Botta, 1999). If young girls gain this fundamental awareness of the media during adolescence, then the ideas that are shaped about the world should be accurate messages. The media plays a crucial role in socializing girls (Lawrie et al., 2006).

**General Effect of Media on Adolescent Girls’ Body Image**

Research, whether historical or more recent, found that the popular media, such as television and magazines, has increasingly portrayed a thinner and thinner body. The effect of the media on body image among adolescent girls links the connection of body dissatisfaction to the eventual development of eating disorders (Lawrie et al., 2006).
Effect of Television Viewing

It appears that the role of watching television plays a significant role in effectively influencing conceptions of reality among adolescent girls (Tiggemann, 2005). More specifically, genres such as soap operas impact the inner thought process of cultural beauty ideals resulting in a strong motivation for thinness among adolescent girls. The study by Tiggemann supports the notion that television viewing affects cognitive ability, thus influencing weight and eating-related behaviors. This study contested that body image is depicted by the actual content of what young people watch on television, rather than length of time spent watching television (Tiggemann, 2005). Similarly, a study among black and white adolescent females revealed that the more the participants idealized thin images overloaded in shows such as, Melrose Place and Beverly Hills 90210, their urge to be thin grew stronger and they became more disappointed about the appearance of their bodies (Botta, 2000).

Another study design developed in 1998 on Fijian adolescent girls was established just three years after the introduction of Western television (Becker, 2004). Becker wanted to test whether Western television images would result in any correlation between the immediate effect of self and body image. Content from this sample data showed that adolescent Fijian girls used television imagery both inspirationally and negatively. An inspirational effect of the media promoted attentiveness, dedication, and status among their friends. Negative processing encouraged by Western images caused the girls to question if they would be able to handle Western society and further solidified the concept of competitive social positioning within their Australian community (Becker, 2004).
Print Media Effects

Although television and print media permeates the whole of society, media and social body image ideals often target girls, resulting in negative health outcomes associated with body dissatisfaction. The National Association of Social Workers (2010), (as cited in Guillen & Barr, 1994) challenges individuals to think about this: a study of mass media magazines revealed that women’s magazines had 10.5 times more advertisements and articles promoting weight loss than men’s magazines.

Field et al. (1999) found that pictures in fashion magazines had a strong impact on girls’ awareness of their weight and shape. The objective of this study by Field and her colleagues was to uncover whether the influence of fashion magazines on 5th grade through 12th grade girls would cause an initiation of weight loss behavior and dieting to decrease size. The overall evidence from this study supports the notion that the more girls read fashion magazine’s during the month, the more likely they were to report that they had dieted or initiated an exercise program to lose weight (Field et al. 1999).

In a study by Champion and Furnham (1999), adolescent female subjects viewed thin and fat pictures of female images from various teen magazines. Female fashion models represented the “thin” pictures. Overweight females represented the “fat” pictures. The assessment involving 203 adolescent girls implied that the effect of the different pictures depended upon whether the subjects classified their own weight and bodies as satisfied or dissatisfied. Girls satisfied with their body image thought less about their weight when they viewed fat pictures. Others who viewed fat pictures and evaluated themselves as dissatisfied with their weight thought more negatively when viewing the thin pictures. The findings of this study revealed that girls who undergo feelings of being
overweight experience pressure to be thinner from viewing pictures in the media (Champion & Furnham, 1999).

Katherine Schwarzenegger’s (2010) findings parallel those of Champion & Furnham (1999). In her book, Katherine states the following:

While it’s true that other factors impact your body image and self-esteem, the majority of our cues about what we should look like come from the media. Advertising and the media feed this obsession with weight, the size of our bodies, and the constant push and reminder to be better, skinnier, prettier, perfect. There’s no room for ordinary in beauty advertisements because they are selling a product that claims to be extraordinary. Still, that contributes greatly to the negative self-perception most girls have.

Because of the media, we are under gigantic pressure to be thin and sexy, especially when we are young, still impressionable, and susceptible to believing everything we see. The promotion of the thin, sexy ideal in our culture has created a situation where most girls and women don’t like their bodies (p. 100). Ultimately, no one is immune to the power and persuasion of advertiser’s messages.

Research continues to support the facts that media tremendously impacts the ideals of American society. For the impressionable adolescent girl, this can be detrimental to both mental and physical wellness. Body dissatisfaction caused by the media can lead to unhealthy behaviors, including eating disorders, low self-esteem, and continuous feelings of insecurity and inferiority.
Future Research

As evident in the articles, research on body image needs to continue in order to build on previous studies. Botta (1999) suggests that an experiment may be a better strategy to detect forced automatic comparisons that result from watching television. More researchers could examine studies at an earlier developmental stage such as pre-adolescence, rather than middle or late adolescence, to attempt to discover and prevent the damaging impact of prolonged exposure to media images. To support this, Lawrie et al (2006) clearly understands the importance of having more studies about the effects of the media. Lawrie et al believes the need for additional education is mandatory, especially at the onset early stages of adolescence, to figure out the influence of the media on the development of body image, self-worth, and one’s personality. Further research on older female subjects is also recommended to determine if past education on body image, nutrition, and benefits of exercise impacted a female’s feelings, thoughts, and perceptions about the media and her body (Lawrie et al., 2006).

Research may want to further develop effective intervention and prevention programs for body disappointment (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2002) among adolescent girls from other cultures, as well as other indigenous small communities (McCabe et al., 2005). McCabe et al.’s (2005) research on native and non-native adolescent Australians revealed that non-native Australians displayed a smaller amount of body disappointments then did native girls. Further studies deem it necessary to investigate how the media influences adolescents from native backgrounds and other cultures. Future research needs to discover additional factors that may uncover why native adolescents engage in more body change strategies than non-natives adolescents. Since McCabe et al.’s study was the
first of its kind perhaps a larger sample size than previously used (50) would be a good start to further research differences between native versus non-native Australians.

Several limitations exist in the available research. Additional research needs to determine the effects of the media with cultures other than Caucasian adolescents (Tiggemann, 2005). The current research samples primarily represent girls from middle-class and upper middle-class. In order to determine if further research would differentiate among the samples, more studies are needed to exist among females from lower socioeconomic classes (Botta, 2000). Numerous studies use cross-sectional, data which is widely dispersed data relating to one period or without regard to differences in time. Cross-sectional data only represents quantities that trace the values taken by a variable over a period such as a month, quarter, or year. Botta (2000) suggests that current research should “be tested with longitudinal data, in which media use and body image and eating attitudes and behaviors are repeatedly measured over time” (p. 155).

**Practical Strategies for School Counselors**

School counselors are in a unique position to help address issues of body image that may be eroding a girl’s self-esteem and jeopardizing her physical and emotional health. Because of their presence in secondary schools, counselors can be pivotal people in increasing awareness among their students. School counselors, have access to parents and to a multitude of girls who may be struggling with these issues (Choate, 2007). Several strategies for school counselors are described below.

**Individual Counseling**

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) can be a useful approach when working with students in individual sessions. CBT can work in many different ways. One is based on
the principle that a pattern of false thinking and belief about one’s body can be recognized objectively and altered, thereby changing the response and eliminating BID (Lawton, 2005). Cognitive-behavioral therapy can also be used to address the behavioral, cognitive, and affective areas of an eating disorder and not limited to BID. CBT is also beneficial to examine contradictions in thought and behavior, purposes, advantages and disadvantages, and cost and benefits (Bernes, et al., 2004). CBT increases the strength and effectiveness of interventions with children who have problems with self-control, including those with body image disturbances. Interventions which help students increase positive self-statements also work to increase the self-esteem of the student (Bauer, Sapp, & Johnson, 2000).

Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy can help deal with issues of perfectionism and black and white thinking (Lenihan & Sanders, 1984). CBT addresses symptom reduction by increasing students’ awareness of personal thoughts and feelings and introduces strategies for changing their behaviors and belief systems in relation to BID struggles (Gerrity & DeLucia, 2007). Since many students with BID have recurring symptoms, it would be helpful for school counselors to assist students with maintenance plans to prepare for changes in the future.

**The Case of Katie**

Mary Pipher, in her book, *Reviving Ophelia* (1994), believes, “girls feel an enormous pressure to be beautiful and are aware of constant evaluations of their appearance” (p. 55). To emphasize this pressure, a story of a female student struggling with BID is taken from the book. Katie was a chubby clarinet player who liked to read and play chess. She was more interested in computers than make up and stuffed animals
than designer clothes. She walked to her first day of junior high with her pencils sharpened and her notebooks neatly labeled. She was ready to learn Spanish and algebra and to audition for the school band. She came home sullen and shaken. The boy who had his locker next to hers had smashed into her with his locker door and sneered, “Move your fat ass.” That night she told her mother, “I hate my looks. I need to go on a diet.”

Imagine Katie was in gym class refusing to participate. When confronted by the Physical Education Teacher and asked why she refused to participate, she “blows up” and yells at the teacher. The gym teacher might then refer Katie to the school counselor. The counselor, through his or her listening skills and ability to connect with Katie, might discover Katie’s negative feelings about her body. The counselor realizes that Katie’s outburst had little to do with the teacher’s questions, but ultimately had more to do with Katie’s feelings of shame about her body. CBT would be a significant approach in this case. The counselor would challenge Katie’s beliefs about herself by asking Katie how she felt why her body size was inadequate. The counselor could also try presenting Katie with images of the various body shapes of real women. If the counselor can begin to change Katie’s thinking about the way she looks, Katie might experience a new belief system and then a new feeling about herself.

This case example is a simplified account of what might happen in an individualized counseling session. It is very likely that a school counselor would work with Katie for several weeks to assist her to change her ideas about herself. This is an approach that would benefit Katie so she can begin to stop filtering (ignoring all the positive aspects about herself while choosing to focus on the negative) and to focus more on the polarized thinking she is doing making it possible to change. In polarized thinking,
things are either “black-or-white.” A girl struggling with BID, will believe she has to be perfect or she is a failure — there is no middle ground (Grohol, 2011).

**Group Counseling**

Rather than individual work, girls like Katie could benefit from small group work. Small groups provide a supportive environment where members can learn about and discuss issues related to physical development such as, puberty, body image, and peer relationships (Khattab & Jones, 2007). Akos and Levitt (2002) as cited in Khattab & Jones (2007) identified the use of positive peer pressure as a powerful and salient force that group facilitators can access during structured small groups. Small groups could increase the social acceptance of lessons learned with the group, while at the same time reducing the risks and susceptibility of negative influences externally to the group. Students within a group setting can build a support system. Not only will they benefit within the group by being with similar students, but girls like Katie, will likely receive anti-dieting messages from peers and friends. These messages may serve to reduce the likelihood of an adolescent girl engaging in body image disturbance behaviors such as dieting and purging (Akos & Levitt, 2002).

School counselors have an opportunity in body image enhancement groups to aid students in accepting each individual’s unique body type (Khattab & Jones, 2007) and ultimately lessen the occurrence of comparing their appearances in striving to achieve interpersonal success. Girls are given the chance to develop support and feel good about themselves.

As a counselor, Gabel & Kearney (1998) deem it important to reflect on one’s own personal views about dieting and body weight before beginning a group aimed at
normalizing dieting and body weight of students. To ensure positive role modeling, it is crucial for counselors to address potential counter transference issues, as counselors ultimately serve as models for body image health (Akos and Levitt, 2002).

Choate (2007) provides several recommendations to school counselors to help in identifying and intervening with children who are “at risk” for developing BID. Choate outlines the importance of counselors maintaining current information regarding the constant and ever evolving physical and psychological changes of an adolescent. Choate encourages counselors to develop groups that incorporate pertinent information. Through games, role playing and group feedback, Choate maintains the group’s goal is to continue to address feelings associated with eating, self-esteem, and body image.

Some individuals think they need to change how they look or act to feel good about themselves. But actually all an adolescent girl needs to do is change the way she sees her body and how she thinks about herself (Choate, 2007).

The first thing the school counselor can do within the group setting is to help girls recognize that their body is their own, no matter what shape, size, or color it might be. However, if a girl is very worried about her weight or size, then the counselor can encourage the girl’s parents to consult with their family physician or a nutritionist.

The goal of the counselor could be to help Katie and other group members identify aspects of their appearance that they can realistically change. This reality helps girls realize that everyone (even the most perfect-seeming celebrity) has imperfections about themselves that they cannot change and need to accept. If there are characteristics the girls within the group want to change, this can be accomplished through individual goal setting. For instance, if a group member wants to improve her health, the counselor
could help her devise a plan to exercise daily and eat nutritious foods. The counselor can help girls like Katie keep track of their progress until they reach their goals. Helping Katie meet a challenge for herself provides a great opportunity to boost her self-esteem.

Girls within the group can learn the importance of positive self-talk. For instance, when they hear negative comments coming from within themselves, they can tell themselves to stop. They do this by teaching oneself the skill of giving three compliments every day. A girl within the group can also make a list during her day about hobbies that really gives her pleasure. By focusing on the good things the girls within the group can do and the positive aspects of their life, girls like Katie can change how they feel about themselves.

**Family Consultation**

Communication within the family plays an important role in development and preventing factors that lead to BID (Nathanson & Botta, 2003). Parental consultation in conjunction with the school counselor can be an important connection between parents and their daughters. In the case of Katie, the counselor could offer support within the school context by possibly including Katie’s mom and dad on school committees and advisory boards, and by offering informational groups that promote a healthy body image (Akos and Levitt, 2002). Parent’s, like Katie’s, can also consult the counselor by using support groups or meet with the counselor individually so they can better help their daughter who struggles with BID. Typically, the most influential adults in a girl’s life are her parents.

Choate (2007) outlines the following strategies for school counselors to use when working with parents like Katie’s: The first strategy is for counselors to educate parents
regarding the impact of their weight, food and appearance related attitudes and behaviors on their children. It is very important for mothers to be aware of the strong effects of modeling on their daughter’s developing body image. Choate (2007), as cited in Graber, J.A., Archibald, A.B., & Brooks-Gunn (1999), suggested that school counselors create an informative news letter regarding these issues for students to share with their families. A second strategy is for counselors to educate parents about the negative effects of dieting such as: metabolic changes, binge eating tendencies, and possible weight gain. Choate recommends school counselors should discourage parents from “diet talking” and instead, offer ways to encourage healthy nutritional options. Third, counselors need to encourage parents to learn how to be advocates for their daughters. Parents can teach their children how to intervene and assist a teased peer, resulting in strategies for coping. As a result, their daughters may learn how to confront a bully (as in the case of Katie). Finally, Choate recommends that parents help their daughters look for other sources of self-worth within themselves. Parents are encouraged to point out their daughter’s strengths and encourage her to use these strengths in positive ways.

**Consulting with Teachers and Coaches**

Teachers can exert significant influence on students by combining information about nutrition, exercise, and self-acceptance into one course (Gabel and Kearney, 1998). Through consultation and collaboration with classroom teachers and coaches school counselors are able to promote healthy body image. The gym teacher, in Katie’s story, aids in the opportunity to influence the thinking and behavior of his students by emphasizing the body’s physical competence rather than how it looks. Choate (2007) states that school counselors, coaches, and teachers need to encourage girls to participate
in a variety of physical activities that girls enjoy. It is important to pay close attention to intrinsic motivation so girls learn to exercise for improved health purposes rather than weight or body change control.

Gabel and Kearney (1998) offer another strategy for school counselors to encourage teachers to combine information about nutrition, exercise, and self acceptance into courses. Discussions with teachers and coaches within the classroom and school environment enable counselors to identify possible biases or unfavorable societal struggles related to weight reduction and ideal weight with students. By virtue of their role as advocates, school counselors have the opportunity to influence the thinking and behavior of their colleagues. By providing in-service education for teachers (Akos & Levitt, 2002) school staff become aware of common developmental issues and the importance of body image which allows in the creation of staff sensitive to the development of all students. Perhaps more influential, counselors could consult with administrators to establish a strict verbal harassment policy.

**Adlerian Concepts for School Counselors**

Alfred Adler born in Vienna, Austria in 1870, died in Aberdeen, Scotland in 1937. Personal illness, the death of his younger brother, and rivalry with his elder brother overshadowed his early childhood. Adler pursued a career in medicine and graduated from the University of Vienna in 1895. It was the collapse of Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918 and the subsequent social upheaval and social deprivation that drew Adler, to the areas of educational reform, child guidance and therapeutic education (Hoffman, 1994). Alfred Adler’s contribution to counseling in the school setting has maintained its
significance for the past 90 years. Several concepts of Adlerian theory will be examined as a useful model for the school counselor when working with girls suffering from BID.

**Striving for Significance**

Adler believed humans moved toward private and frequently unknown goals. Ansbacher & Ansbacher, (1956) stated that Adlerian psychology “stands firmly on the ground of evolution and, in the light of it, regards all human striving as striving for perfection. Bodily and psychology, the urge to life is tied unalterably to this striving” (p. 106). The first message of an individual’s environment is to overcome weakness. For example, many girls have marvelous gifts and incredible talents but may only focus on the shortcomings of their body. Girls may have a hard time moving past their perceived weaknesses and focusing on their strengths. An adolescent girl who suffers with BID sees herself as needing to “overcome” her physical inadequacies or her perceived inadequacies of her body. Because of this early message, overcoming inadequacies, or the minuses, and striving for significant self-fulfillment, or the plusses, becomes the unconscious aim of the girl with BID. This striving from the minus to the plus results in a never-ending striving for superiority. Striving for significance is the ultimate goal. One of Adler’s key concepts is that of social interest. “Social interest” can be defined as an innate need to belong in harmony with others (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). This is the most fundamental process by which a girl can fulfill her true human potential. For instance, if an adolescent girl has social interest then she proves or enacts a “useful” style of life. If she does not have social interest then she is self-absorbed and is concerned only with herself. Such a style of life is “useless.” When striving is infused with well developed Social Interest it moves towards superiority in competence and considers
“useful” striving. But if the movement, when infused with mistaken beliefs, is unattainable, the striving for significance becomes on the useless side (Dreikurs, 1989). Subsequently, unattainable, for the BID sufferer, is the Barbie doll-like body portrayed in the media.

**Feelings and Mistaken Beliefs**

According to Adler, mistaken beliefs often play a role in leading people of all ages into problem behaviors. The concept of “Mistaken means inaccurate, misguided, or confused and Beliefs are convictions, opinions, or ideas” (Folkers & Engelmann, 1997, p. 5). Mistaken beliefs form when an individual is very young—before the age of six. Individuals observe a situation and then interpret it. Before age six, an adolescent girl does not have the mental ability to interpret correctly resulting in mistaken beliefs. Likewise, a girl’s unhealthy eating habits manifest into mistaken beliefs. When a girl becomes aware of some of her mistaken beliefs and determines how to change them, she can be more successful in her day-to-day living (Folkers & Engelmann, 1997).

**Goals of Misbehavior**

Adler believed that all behavior has a purpose, even if that purpose is not always clear, does not always make sense, and often lies below the surface of conscious awareness. When a girl can figure out the purpose behind an action, she can decide what to do about it. Knowledge gives her the power to change (Folkers & Engelmann, 1997).

Rudolph Dreikus, another psychiatrist influential in understanding behavior and its causes, studied with Adler and worked closely with families and children. As Dreikurs observed children, he noticed that their misbehavior seemed to have four main causes. He called these causes “goals” because, even though they may get a child in trouble, they
also achieve what the child wants. These goals can often be related to mistaken beliefs. Dreikurs’ four mistaken goals include: attention, power, revenge, and feeling inadequate (Folkers and Engelmann, 1997). As it relates to BID, this paper will discuss the mistaken goal of feeling inadequate.

According to Folkers and Engelmann (1997):

It is hard to picture ‘feeling inadequate’ as a goal, (but sometimes it is). The mistaken beliefs that guide the goal of ‘feeling inadequate’ might look something like this: I only count when I convince others that I’m helpless, or People shouldn’t expect anything of me, or It’s no use trying (p. 164).

An adolescent girl who has completely given up and is discouraged might be acting this way because she feels like she does not belong. Her discouragement triggers the belief that she is helpless, and that she is unable to succeed. A girl seeking this goal may show feelings of inadequacy by not showing up for class or school, may not take care of her body physically by not eating properly or by not caring about how she looks. She may not be interested in activities she used to enjoy. She may act sad or depressed and may refuse to do anything that takes time or effort. An Adlerian school counselor helps girls understand feelings of inadequacy and how to start feeling strong and capable.

Besides attention, power, revenge, and feeling inadequate, Folkers and Engelmann (1997) have added “responding to peer pressure” as another mistaken goal that causes problems in life. For an adolescent girl struggling with BID, this is significantly more detrimental. The goal is to fit in or belong. When a girl is guided by the mistaken belief that says I only count when I’m like everyone else—even if ‘everyone else’ is doing risky or dangerous things,” (p. 166) peer pressure is hard to resist for girls
who want to look like everyone else. The BID sufferer may begin to diet or engage in eating disorder behavior simply because “everyone else” is doing the same.

**Inferiority**

“It should always be remembered that the inferiority feeling is a faulty self-evaluation. The inferiority may exist only in the imagination of the individual when she compares herself to others” (Dreikurs, 1989, p.23). Inferiority feelings arise when a girl compares herself with other people whom she perceives to be more skilled, accomplished, or better off (than she). Feelings of envy and feelings of personal worthlessness challenge the whole concept of oneself. This can be particularly hard to endure for the adolescent girl with BID (Oberst & Stewart, 2003).

**Conclusion**

Adolescent girls struggle to put together an answer to the question “who am I?” At this time, more than ever, girls view their appearance as the most significant aspect of their identities. Their self-evaluation of appearance becomes increasingly determined by comparisons with others (Choate, 2007). It is not surprising that BID and low self-esteem are pervasive in adolescent females, when a girl bases her identity on comparisons with the current standard for women’s beauty as portrayed in the mass media.

This Master’s Project review of literature has demonstrated the importance of the effects of the media on adolescent female body image. It has also revealed that school counselors must provide girls with the skills and support necessary to resist sociocultural pressures that are present in school surroundings. This paper provides practical strategies for the school counselor to enhance a girl’s body image.
Two key findings identified that recent works have begun to examine multiple facets that exacerbate the phenomenon of BID. One finding is the sociocultural theory and the other is SCT. An additional component represented in this paper discussed how BID affected adolescent girls when it involved peer impact. Such peer impacts explored dealt with conversations and criticisms about beauty and appearance and body dissatisfaction between friends. It is clear that poor body image occurs when girls direct their focus to appearance-related issues represented in the mass media, thus reinforcing the value and importance of appearance to close friends and supporting the creation of beauty standards.

Studies reveal that no one particular mode of the media, peers, or parents can be solely blamed for negative body image. It seems that interpretation of the media is truly the factor that affects adolescent girls’ perspective and perception on what they deem as beauty.

Adlerian theory provides a helpful framework for teachers and parents to use for understanding a girl’s struggle with BID and addresses how they can assist girls in being successful. When girls feel they are connected to the people around them and have a sense of belonging they behave in a way that enhances these positive feelings. This is a constructive and affirmative situation not only for the BID girl but for the group surrounding the child as well. A classroom, and better yet a school, that values the importance of combating sociocultural pressure aims to help each girl belong.

School counselors can help instill the belief that a “rock what you’ve got” attitude is essential in creating a positive message for all young girls. This belief can aid in
helping girls understand that the size they wear has nothing to do with their self-worth and beauty or who girls truly are on the inside.

Educators and parents need to teach girls the many ways in which they have value beyond their physical appearance. By further reclaiming their strengths, girls are capable of developing the resilience to combat the complex sociocultural and developmental challenges of adolescence.
References


*Adolescence, 40*, 115-127.


