

BODY IMAGE CONFLICTS IN ADOLESCENTS

Parul's mom brought her to my OPD as she had irregular menses. I remembered Parul as a cheerful, happy, healthy girl. Today she was looking drawn, tense, irritable. She had lost about 6 to 7 Kg of weight, had dry, dull skin and looked pale.

Parul was an unfortunate victim of body image conflict. In an attempt to attain zero figure, she was following a crash diet, with extensive gym. Her attempt to look perfect had backfired and she had developed hormonal imbalance with irregular menses.

Adolescents adapt to physical, hormonal, psychological changes along with emerging sexuality. Thus, it is a phase of significant identity development. During this phase children become aware of their looks, their appearance and at times start idol worshipping.

Body image is a mental representation. It is a perception of how we look, our body type and physical attractiveness.

Body image refers to how people see themselves. About 94% of people desire some change in how they look and want to change something or the other. If this dissatisfaction becomes a persistent worry, they are unable to focus on career, studies or daily routine.

Distorted body image, also called as negative body image refers to unrealistic view of how person sees his / her body. Seen more commonly in age group of 15 to 30 years and more common in females.

Adolescent girls start perceiving their body images from college days. These ideas are imbibed from their friends, siblings, media and existing fashion trends. TV, movies, advertisements and social media play a major role. Early childhood experiences, trauma or abuse, and negative comments from other people also contribute.

What is an eating disorder ?

Body dysmorphia is a psychological condition that leads to abnormal eating habits due to negative body image.

1. Mind is obsessed with looks, physical appearance or defects that are not noticeable to others.
2. Person indulges into repeated mirror checking, seeks reassurance about looks.
3. This state of mind leads to distress, depression affecting social behaviour
4. False belief that if they reach their "beauty goals", only then they will be happy.
5. This then leads to eating disorders and stress.

Relationship between body image and eating disorder

Such people are increasingly critical and very rigid about their diet. They feel as if normal, healthy food is dangerous for their health .

These disorders are

1. Restrictive eating and over exercising
2. Anorexia Nervosa- Extreme dieting, Fasting, over exercise, diet pills or diet meals, leading to loss of appetite .
3. Bulimia Nervosa-Secret bouts of compulsive over eating followed by self-indulged vomiting, feeling of self-disgust, depression.
4. Binge eating- Consume very large portions of food and cannot stop early.
5. Orthorexia = Specific foods are purposefully avoided because they are considered unhealthy.

This along with over exercise or gym activities can cause serious side effects

COMPLICATIONS OF GYMMING IN ADOLESCENTS

1. High chances of fatigue
2. Diet imbalance
3. Serious injuries
4. Body dysmorphic disorder
5. Damage to heart.

Thus teenagers must avoid weight training and overt cardio training. They should restrict to floor exercises, or ground games.

CAN EATING DISORDER AFFECT MENSTRUAL CYCLE ?

These disorders stimulate production of stress hormones like cortisol, growth hormone, and Noradrenaline. This can lead to anxiety, sleep problems, panic attacks, fatigue, muscle weakness, lethargy. Prolonged eating disorders and sudden loss or gain in weight can cause menstrual disorders.

HOW PARENTS CAN HELP

1. Avoid comparisons about their looks with other children, cousins and siblings
2. Appreciate child for his talent, good virtues, hobbies, kindness, helpful nature.
3. Communicate with other family members and instruct to stop body shaming

4. Maintain healthy lifestyle. Healthy eating habits , regular physical activity, exercise, good family atmosphere with trust and love. It's essential that adolescents can confide with parents and can discuss their problems.
5. Explain that this is a transient period. It's important to focus on studies, career and give more importance to character building with overall development.
6. Discuss and explain physical and hormonal changes of adolescence

Remember that our bodies are not just images. They are an abode where we live and experience life. Do not let your body image ruin your life experience. Learn to love and care for self.