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The Eating Disorders Association of Ireland

A Real World Perspective:
Promoting Positive Body Image & Awareness of Eating Disorders in Secondary Schools

Dr Fiona Flynn
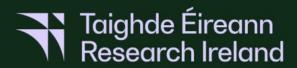Youth Development Manager

All Stories Matter

"we have a considerable issue with students in our school not eating while in school"

"Students not eating for the whole school day - saying they had breakfast at home. Parents reporting they only had an apple for dinner"

"So many over-exercising and under-eating... pushing their bodies beyond healthy limits or restricting food intake in an attempt to control their appearance"

"The school pressure is huge... at our school talk about food and calories and avoiding food is 'normal'"

What I Will Cover

- Research on body image and eating disorders
- Developing an intervention to promote positive body image and eating disorder awareness in the 'real world' school environment
- The engaged research process
- Evaluation and findings
- What we have learned
- The current landscape and where to now

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Eating Disorders in Ireland

- The number of under-18 hospital admissions for eating disorders has increased by 43% in the last five years. (Health Research Board, 2023) The prevalence of Eating disorders is extremely concerning.

- Increase in the number of preteen children in Ireland developing eating disorders with rates as much as doubled in 10 years (Petkova et al, 2019)

- An increase of 66% in acute hospital admissions for eating disorders was observed among young female adolescents in Ireland between 2019-2020 (Barrett & Richardson, 2022).

Body Image in Ireland

- Research indicates that 65% of young people (aged 12-17) report body image concerns as a key stressor affecting their mental health. (OCO, A Piece of My Mind Report, 2023)

- Significant relationship between time spent online (more than 3 hours) and higher levels of depression and anxiety and lower levels of body esteem (Dooley et al., 2019)

- In a survey of 500 girls (aged 12 -19) 61% claimed that because of social media they struggled with low body image – ISSU, Youth Lab, Shona Project (2022)

Body Image International Research

- Negative body image affects an estimated 75% of adolescents worldwide (Milton, 2021)

- Negative body image is widely regarded as the primary risk factor for disordered eating behaviours such as restrictive dieting, binge eating, muscle building (Goldschmidt, Wall, Loth, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2015) and the development of clinical eating disorders (Stice et al., 2017).

'Alarming Rise in Eating Disorders'

- International research indicates that eating disorders are on the rise worldwide (Lopez-Gil et al., 2023)

- In the U.S., health visits related to eating disorders have more than doubled since 2018 (Pastore et al., 2023). In Europe, a similar increase in children and adolescents has been observed (Gilsbach et al., 2023).

- In the UK, hospital admissions for eating disorders in UK boys and young men increased 128% and child and adolescent admissions increased by 35% in 2022 (The London Centre, 2022).

Social Media & Peer Environment

- The proliferation of appearance-related content on social media which endorses unrealistic appearance ideals alongside picture perfect (often edited) images of peers, celebrities and fashion or fitness models (Thai et al., 2023) may also amplify this effect (Rajanala et al., 2018).

Social Media & Mental Health

- APA Health Advisory (2023) highlights the link between social comparisons on social media and negative body image (Fioravanti et al., 2022), depressive symptoms (Maheux et al, 2022) and disordered eating (Padin et al., 2021; Dane et al., 2023)

- Social media itself "is neither inherently beneficial or harmful to people" and that "in most cases, the effects of social media are dependent on adolescents' own personal and psychological characteristics and circumstances".

WHO Europe

"Young people have a critical role to play in the unprecedented challenges that the world is facing today. They should be active participants in shaping their lives and directing their futures. They are at the forefront of change and innovation and have the spirit to make things happen" (WHO, 2022).

Real World Perspective

- Listening to the 'youth voice' – focus groups to discuss body image (n = 16, m = 6, f = 10)

- What we asked: Is there an issue? Who does it affect? What are the pressures?

- Social media was identified as primary source of pressure to body image

Exposure to socio-cultural ideals

'It's always in the background even when you are doing other things'.

(Male, age 16)

'I never see people like me in the media and that can really get to me'.

(Female, age 16)

"It (social media) can get you comparing yourself and feeling bad about yourself really quickly and it's hard to get out of that"

(Female, age 16).

What they said….
Youth focus group themes

- A body image, media literacy and social media literacy intervention for the school setting is warranted.

- Include young people in the co-creation process to ensure that lesson content is engaging, enjoyable and relevant.

- Include video content to prompt class discussion which includes the views of young people that students can relate to.

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What will work

Videos:

"Videos of what other young people have to say..." "we need to have videos we can talk about to get us started"

Standardised content:

"It needs to be the same in every school"   "some teachers are good at delivering this stuff and then it's not fair if you get a teacher who isn't"

What can we do?

- Research widely acknowledges that effective prevention is required to support adolescent psychological wellbeing .

- A school-based programme provides a cost-effective way to access a wide range of young people within their peer environment.

Objective

Develop a school based intervention to:

- Challenge current pressures such as social media, peers and media.

- Promote awareness of eating disorders and the supports available.

- Acknowledge barriers to effective delivery within the real-world school environment and work with key stakeholders to develop a programme which was relevant and engaging for young people and 'easy to use' for teachers.

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How to develop relevant content? Engaged Research.

Engaged Research Framework

- Impact Assessment
- Project Close Out
- Knowledge Mobilisation & Translation
- Project Kick-Off
- Proposal Development
- Co-Generating Ideas
- Knowledge Co-Production & Exchange
- Data Collection & Management
- Research Planning & Design
- Data Access
- Data Analysis

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Listening to Key Stakeholders

- Key decision makers (n = 2, f = 2)
  Bodywhys CEO, SPHE Representative

- SPHE Teachers (n = 3, m = 2, f = 1)

- Youth Stakeholders (n = 53, m = 22, f = 31)
  aged 14 to 22

PHASE ONE: FOCUS GROUPS

Youth Participants (N = 16;10 female, 6 male)
Two focus groups with a mix of participants from each youth group

CnÓg Youth group from Waterford. (4 female, 2 male)	CnÓg Youth group from Dublin (6 female, 4 male)

PHASE TWO: STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION ON INTERVENTION DEVELOPMENT

INTERVIEWS AND CONSULTATION WORKSHOPS (N = 54, 30 female, 24 male)

Teachers (1 female, 2 male)	Key Decision Makers (2 female)	3 Groups of Youth Participants (27 female, 22 male)
Interviews with Teachers One SPHE Teacher from each participating school	Interviews with Key Decision Makers: CEO of Bodywhys SPHE Co-ordinator	Informal Consultation Workshops: 1. Secondary School Students, 15 female, 15 male) 2. CnÓg Youth Group (8 female, 7 male) 3. Bodywhys Youth Panel (4 female)

PHASE THREE: INTERVENTION REVIEW AND REFINEMENT

(N = 19, 12 female, 7 male)
Three CCWs with each youth group separately to review and refine materials

CnÓg Youth Group, Monaghan (8 female, 7 male)	Bodywhys Youth Panel (4 female)

What they said: Decision makers

Theme 1: Definite need for a body image and social media literacy intervention:

"there is definitely a need for it...especially in an Irish context"

"a huge increase in requests for content about social media pressure from teachers"

"clear information on body image, mental health and supports available"

"focus on eating disorders"

Subtheme 1.1: Objectives and target population

"You need to ensure you adhere to the HSE Eating Disorder Model of Care document."

'The resources need to be easy to use - yes the students need the eating disorder information but not all teachers will get training on it so you will need to really consider that"

"definitely junior students" "...that's the age I'm hearing about from teachers as really in need of social media literacy – I would say first or second year – you will have to take advice from teachers"

Decision Makers

Theme 2: Existing initiatives

"You will need to link the lessons to the SPHE curriculum"

"short videos...and lessons with clear guidelines.. "no more than three minutes ideally"

What they said: Teacher Themes

Target age: *"We are seeing it in first year and second year.."*

Easy to Use Materials: *"We don't get much training for SPHE. It needs to be easy to use"*

Fear of delivering sensitive content. *"Afraid of opening a can of worms"…. "Afraid of saying the wrong thing"*

Wider Context: *"We need information to signpost parents to"*

Barriers to delivery of wellbeing content in the school setting

- Lack of teacher training

- Fear of teaching sensitive content

- Time constraints

- A need for content which is relevant, engaging and easy to use for teachers without a requirement for training or specialist knowledge

- A requirement for additional content for schools on promoting positive body image and to share with parents.

Research Perspective

- Teachers receive little or no training for wellbeing content (Herlitz et al., 2020; Ofsted, 2019; Shepherd et al., 2013; Tancred, 2017). Urgent need for resources designed to support delivery in the current real-world environment.

- Requirement for interventions to address body image concerns of adolescents across the gender spectrum (Gordon et al., 2021)

- Interventions to improve body image in adolescents should ideally also include a focus on improving parental awareness as well as education professionals (Marengo, 2018).

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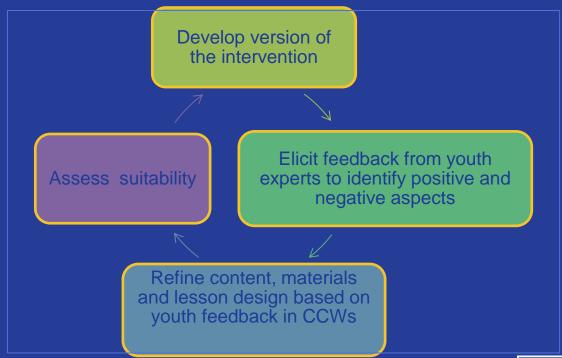The Eating Disorders Association of Ireland

The challenge

- How to develop resources which are easy to use for teachers without any requirement for training?

- How to ensure the resources are engaging and relevant to young people?

- How to promote discussion in the 'peer-environment' to promote attitude and behaviour change?

- How to enable schools to disseminate the relevant information to parents?

Co Creation Workshops

Youth stakeholders (n = 53, f = 31, m = 22)

Iterative cycle of intervention development

Co Creation Workshop Feedback

Real Young People Talk Body Image

- *"Just too boring, they don't hold your attention". (Male, age 16)*
- *"People would just tune out straightaway and start talking and not pay attention for the rest of the lesson". (Male, age 17)*
- *"They need to be people who inspire you a bit more, like famous people or something". (Female, age 16)*

Media Literacy

- Include airbrushing videos and also more images and content related media techniques.
- Inclusion of Instagram lie Video
- *"That really makes you think – it's cool how you see what they post and what their life is actually like" (Female, age 16)*
- *"Definitely include that one" (male, age 17)*
- Develop video on' 'fitting in' as this is a key challenge to body image in first year.

Psych-Ed Videos

- The youth participants in each group voted for the inclusion of the psycho-educational eating disorder videos.
- *"It's really important for us to know about this stuff". (Male, age 16)*
- *"These videos tell you lots that you don't know. They could really help if you are worried about a friend". (Female, age 16)*
- *"They are interesting and easy to watch but sound quality is not great" (Male, age 17).*
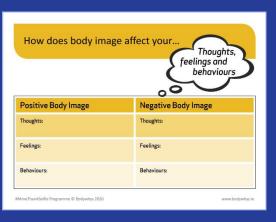
Final Version of Intervention

- Each of the lessons includes lesson slides with the videos, group discussion points embedded.

- Each #MTAS lesson has an accompanying #MTAS facilitators guide and #MTAS student workbook.

4 Lessons delivered by SPHE Teachers to First Year Students

1 week in between – to assimilate learning

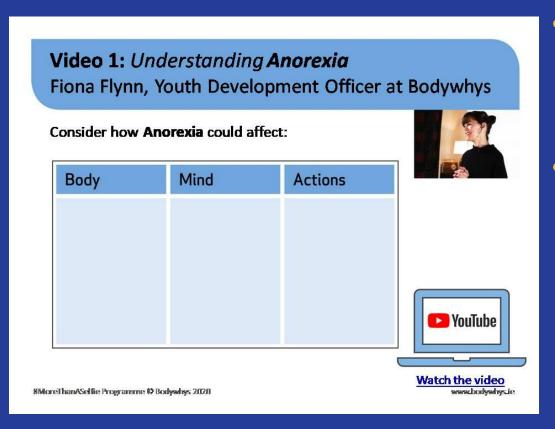| **Week 1: Body Image & The Media**	**Week 2. Body Image & The Media**	**Week 3: The Right Fit**	**Lesson 4** **Body Image & Mental Health**
Group discussion on body image and impact on thoughts, feelings and behaviours.	Recap on influences to body image.	Video 1: Identity and fitting in.	Partner activity to discuss impact of body on mental health.
Video 1: 'Instagram vs Real Life' video. Class discussion.	Video 1: Body Image and Self Esteem.	Group discussion on body image pressures in secondary school an ways to improve peer environment.	Videos by mental health professional on eating disorders; signs symptoms, emotional, psychological and physical impacts.
Video 2: Boyband discuss: Social Media Myths.	Group activity to highlight discrepancy between social media and real life.	Private reflective written exercise	Videos: 1. Anorexia. 2. Bulimia. 3 Binge Eating Disorder.
Video 3: Media production techniques exposed. Cognitive dissonance exercise – speak out against media ideals	Group discussion and individual exercise to identify positive coping strategies.	Video 2: Self Talk: CBT based exercise to encourage self compassion.	Video 4: Animated video to illustrate eating disorder development and recovery pathways.
Video 4: Real or Marketing? Boyband discuss social media and advertising.	Video 2: The Strypes: 'Making a Choice, Just Be Yourself'	Video 3: 'Change How You Feel, Not How You Look'.	Information on how to seek help.
Homework: Notice your body image influences.	Video 3: Body Image & Social Media. Activity to promote critical social media use.	Homework: Reflect on ways to support friends to 'Be Body Positive'.	
	Video 4: Youth Advice On Challenging Social Media Pressure		

Sensitive Content

Video 1: *Understanding* **Anorexia**
Fiona Flynn, Youth Development Officer at Bodywhys

Consider how **Anorexia** could affect:

Body	Mind	Actions

▶ **YouTube**

Watch the video
www.bodywhys.ie

- All sensitive content delivered in brief videos

- Responses in facilitators guide presented in age appropriate, jargon free language.

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Pilot Study

(1) Non-randomised study to assess pre-post changes in outcomes following the implementation of the #MTAS intervention

(2) Small qualitative study designed to provide some insights into participants' experiences of the new intervention with regard to the extent to which they found it relevant, engaging and useful, as well as any insights/recommendations they might have.

Participants & Settings

- This stage of the study involved a non randomised controlled trial involving pre and post-testing of an intervention group (n=88) and a control/comparison (n=51) group of adolescents aged 11-14 years.

- There were 139 participants in the study. Of the sample, 71 were male (51%) and 68 were female (49%). The majority (99%) of the youth participants were aged 12 or over. Most participants (65%) were aged 13.

Method

Experimental group participated in 4, 40 minute lessons on media literacy body image, while the waitlist control group received their usual classes.

Measures

Measures: All participants completed baseline and post intervention questionnaires. The experimental group also completed an evaluation form to assess their experience of the intervention.   All measures used were age appropriate and had successfully been used before with young adolescents (age 12-14)

- The Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale

- CASSS Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale

- SATAQ.4. Sociocultural Attitudes to Appearance Questionnaire

- Social Media Use Questionnaire

Significant Findings

Male intervention group participants:

Reduced internalisation of muscular/athletic

Reduction in daily hours of social media use

Female intervention group participants:

Increased social media literacy

Results from evaluation forms

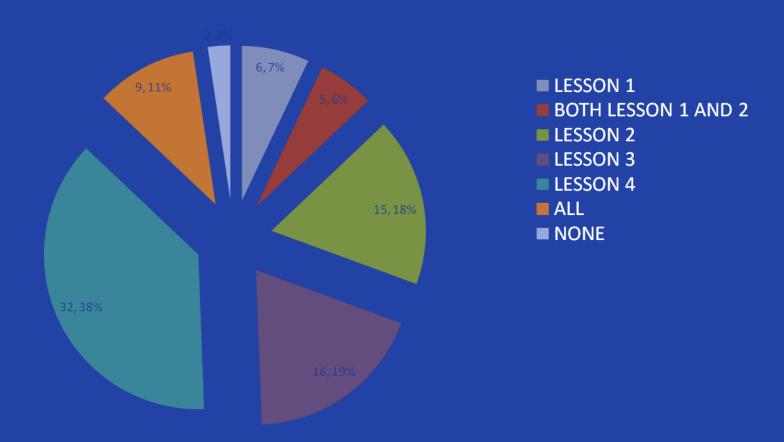Students were asked "Do you think the lessons were good for your class?"

- All boys: 89.5% said yes
- Mixed: 90.9% said yes
- All girls: 93.9% said yes

Students were asked "Would you recommend this programme for friends or family?"

- All boys: 86.5% said yes
- Mixed: 89.5% said yes
- All girls: 87.9 % said yes

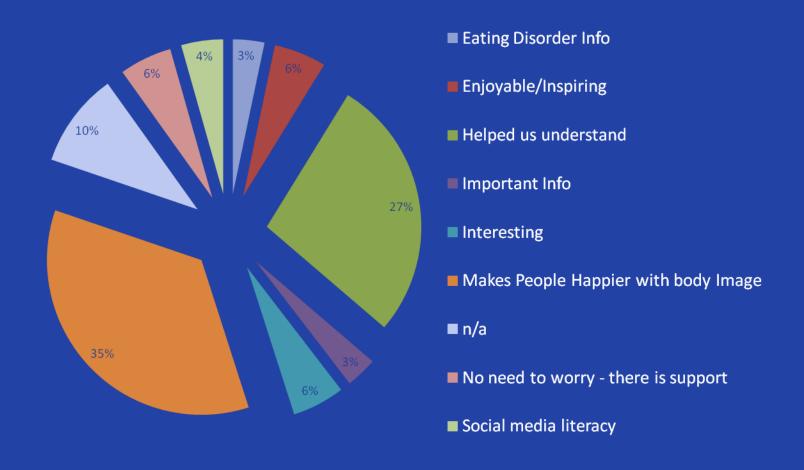# Which lesson did you like most?

Legend:
- LESSON 1
- BOTH LESSON 1 AND 2
- LESSON 2
- LESSON 3
- LESSON 4
- ALL
- NONE

Pie chart values:
- 2, 2%
- 6, 7%
- 5, 6%
- 15, 18%
- 16, 19%
- 32, 38%
- 9, 11%

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Do you think these lessons were good for your class? Why?

Legend:
- Eating Disorder Info
- Enjoyable/Inspiring
- Helped us understand
- Important Info
- Interesting
- Makes People Happier with body Image
- n/a
- No need to worry - there is support
- Social media literacy

Pie chart values: 4%, 3%, 6%, 10%, 27%, 35%, 6%, 3%, 6%

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Semi-Qualitative Findings
General Comments

"Learning about how you have to be yourself and not let others change you or you won't be happy. It was very interesting"
(Male, age 13)

'It gave me good advice. Not to be pressurised about your appearance. It tells us how to get help and that we are not alone'
(Female, age 13)

"That there are groups to help if I ever need it. It fills me with confidence"
(Male, age 13)

We learned loads (about eating disorders), I didn't know most of that stuff before".
(Female, age 13)

Teacher Participant Feedback

Theme One: Students enjoyed the lessons

"The lads were very engaged talking about the band videos, what they were wearing, what they said – good group discussion"

Theme Two: User friendly

"No problems with access"

Theme Three: Deliver the #MTAS Lessons earlier in the term

"Prompt teachers to deliver this programme early in the school year as it's a lot of work for the last few weeks"

#MTAS Launched 15ᵗʰ October 2020

Current #MTAS Metrics

- #MTAS Resources accessed 1452 times

- According to metrics the programme has been delivered to 318,317 students

Strengths

- This programme has the advantage of being piloted by teachers in the classroom setting. It has been designed to fit into and complement the SPHE curriculum in Ireland.

- The #MTAS programme was viewed very positively by youth participants, and their experience appeared to be unaffected by teacher delivery style. This is an important finding, given that the teachers received no training on the content or any aspects of body image and/or social media literacy.

Strengths

- All teachers agreed the materials were very accessible and easy to use.

- No teachers indicated that training would have been beneficial or that they experienced issues which they were unable to address.

- This suggests that the manualised materials, supporting website and use of relevant video content, provided an effective model which may also be useful for other universal school -based interventions.

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Adds to International Research

- Findings from other school-based interventions (Gordon et al., 2023; Bell et al., 2022) indicated positive effects to female participants only

- Inclusion of information to promote awareness of eating disorders and the supports available

- Engaged research –youth voice prioritised at all stages of development and evaluation

- Knowledge translation – information to promote positive body image in wider context

Limitations

- No longer term follow-up

- Small sample of teacher participants

- Lack of an additional measure of body image or subjective wellbeing

- Short shelf life

Back to the drawing board….

Engaged Research Framework

- Impact Assessment
- Project Close Out
- Knowledge Mobilisation & Translation
- Proposal Development
- Project Kick-Off
- Co-Generating Ideas
- Knowledge Co-Production & Exchange
- Data Collection & Management
- Data Access
- Research Planning & Design
- Data Analysis

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What we are hearing from teachers…

"we have a considerable issue with students in our school not eating while in school"

"Students not eating for the whole school day- saying they had breakfast at home. Parents reporting they only had an apple for dinner"

"Students not bringing lunch to school, not eating during the school day"

"Low self esteem regarding body image, Students openly admitting that they don't want to eat".

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More teacher concerns…

Changes in eating habits, talking negatively about their bodies/appearance, excessive exercising after eating, masking their body shape through clothing, fainting in school, inability to maintain focus during lessons

Focusing on losing weight in an unhealthy way. Going to the gym a lot with a focus on losing weight.

Students obsessed with body image, muscles, energy drinks, working out, clothes, players fit jerseys

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What we are hearing from young people…

"The school pressure is huge… when my friend went to college she couldn't believe that the girls there just ate when they were hungry… at our school talk about food and calories and avoiding food was our 'normal'"

"It has been totally normalised – this not eating…eating disorders and extreme dieting has been glamourised"

Youth Panel Continued..

"The pressure to exercise is massive too… there are so many boys who have no flexibility around exercise – they avoid social activities to not miss exercise"

"the football boys … what to eat or not eat…that gets really obsessive"

Future Directions

- New content developed in collaboration with young people and teachers

- Larger scale evaluation and longer-term follow up

- Additional measures of body image

Thank you for listening.

Questions?

Support Information

Supports email: alex@bodywhys.ie

Helpline: 01-2107906

Get in touch: info@bodywhys.ie

For more information see:

www.bodywhys.ie & www.bodywhysbodyimage.ie

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