



Discussion Guide

For Adults Working with Teens

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Lesson: Myth of the Ideal Body

Learning Objective: Teens will discuss body image issues and how they relate to sexual decision-making and relationships.

Before the lesson: Copy and then cut the Body Image Fishbowl Quotes below into strips and place them into two envelopes, one for the boys group and one for the girls group.

Note to Educator: This activity requires a fairly even gender split in your group. It will not be successful if you have predominantly guys or girls in your group.

1. Divide participants into same-gender groups. Ask the boys to go first and arrange themselves in a circle. Ask the girls' group to sit in a circle around the boys' group. Explain that this activity will provide an opportunity for each gender to hear and be heard by the other gender.
2. Explain that the members of the inner circle will discuss a topic among themselves, while the outer circle observes without interruption or comment. Assure members of the outer circle they will have time to speak later; instruct them to listen carefully and to note their responses to what they hear. Remind the inner circle of the relevant ground rules such as no put-downs, use "I" statements, one person speaks at a time, allow everyone the opportunity to speak and everyone has the right to pass.
3. Place the boys' envelope with slips of paper in the middle of the inner circle and inform the group to have someone select a quote and read it out to the group and discuss their reactions to it. Give the group 10-15 minutes to talk about as many of the slips as they get to.
4. Then while the participants remain seated, ask the outer circle to give feedback about what they heard during the discussion. You might ask the outer group questions such as, How did you feel while you were listening to this conversation? How did it feel to not be able to respond? What was said that was surprising to you or told you something new?
5. Have group members switch places so that the outer circle becomes the inner circle and vice versa. Review the rules for both the inner and outer group; then repeat steps 3 through 5.

6. After both groups have talked and given feedback, instruct group members to arrange themselves in one circle so that they are all mixed together.

7. Help process the activity by asking the whole group the following questions: Overall, what did you think of this activity? What did you learn about the other gender? About your own gender? Did all members of the same gender feel the same way about the subject? Why was it important for the boys' group to go first? Why might it be more difficult for boys to talk publicly about this topic? In what ways might you use what you learned in the future?

8. Have students read **Beyond a “Flawless” Body: A Newfound Image of Me**, on page 1. Use the following questions to guide discussion:

- The author talks about how seeing thin girls on TV made her feel that her body wasn't beautiful. Why do you think the media (movies, TV, music videos) can have such an influence over how a person feels about himself or herself?
- What are some ways a person could decrease the influence of the media on his/her feelings about his/her body? (Write suggestions where everyone can see them.)
- Being thin is not necessarily considered beautiful in all cultures and was not always considered so in ours. During the Renaissance, for example, women with large hips and small breasts—and with a certain amount of fat—were considered most beautiful. Why do you think, at this particular time in our culture, we have decided that thin equals beautiful? Why do you think our ideas about what is beautiful are so narrow?
- Why, in our culture, do you think there is so much emphasis placed on what we look like?
- When you think about the people in your life of all ages, do think that people whose physical appearance conforms to the media ideals of beauty are happier, more successful or have better relationships than other people? Discuss your responses.
- By the end of her story, the author seems to have accepted her body and feels that, though it's not “perfect” by society's standards, that it is beautiful to her. What do you think helped her achieve this feeling?

9. As a homework assignment or for extra credit, have students research ideals of male and female beauty in another culture or another era and report on their findings to the class.

The Discussion Guide was created by Nora Gelperin, M.Ed., Director of Draining and Education at Answer. For additional lessons, go to http://answer.rutgers.edu/page/lesson_plans.

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**Body Image Fishbowl Quotes
FOR BOYS' GROUP:**

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"I'm very self-conscious about my body. I'm afraid I might look unattractive. I weigh 120 pounds or something like that. I feel like I have to be skinnier to be attractive. I work out like crazy and don't eat much."

—*Dylan, age 17*
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"The standard of beauty for men is set in stone – it's the sixone Ken (doll), with flowing brown hair, chiseled chin, and plastic smile. That's truly the American image in all the men's magazines. It has been for quite some time. It's just part of our conditioning."

—*Louis, age 16*
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"I think boys and men are concerned about their bodies and the way they look. This one time I went to this dance audition at a nearby high school and this guy – it was so funny because he had tights, and he put socks in his tights to make it look bigger, and I was like 'Why are you doing that?' and he was like 'Because it's not big enough!' And it was so funny, but I was like, who cares?"

—*Roland, age 17*
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"People sometimes think guys don't care about their appearance and their body. But it's not true. If you're fat, when people look at you they're going to picture you as the fat kid. They're not going to say, 'Oh, he's the cool guy.' Each time I have moved, the kids in school all look at me and the first thing they think is 'He's the short guy. He's not supposed to be here. He must be like a smart kid that's three grades ahead because he's too short to be in our grade.'"

—*Dennis, age 17*
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FOR GIRLS' GROUP:

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“I think girls need to stop allowing the media to tell YOU what is considered the ‘ideal’ body image. I’m a black woman and as the average black woman can relate, I got CURVES. To be honest, I’m damn proud of it, because I feel sexy having hips, thick thighs, and a round bottom. Basically, I think men love women with curves, because it’s ‘womanly’ which makes it sexy to them. I’m also comfortable with my height and weight. It’s frustrating, because I can try on a pair of jeans, but they wouldn’t fit, and you would think it would make me feel fat, but I don’t. I am aware that my body type is simply different than a white or Asian woman.”

—*Barbie, age 18*

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“I do think women are exploited far too much! I myself have a rather large chest, not just for my age but in general. And everyone always assumes that I am just some bimbo for them to gawk and stare at. Or they assume that they are fake. I look older for my age but I can only pull off about 17 or 18 at the most. The sad part is that 17 and 18 year olds are getting breast implants. It’s so sad. Why can’t women be appreciated for their brains and talents?”

—*Shania, age 14*

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“My boyfriend loved me no matter what I looked like. Before I met my boyfriend, I wouldn’t eat all day until dinner at eight o’clock. At the end of the school day, when we had math, I couldn’t concentrate at all. Then I would eat a ton of dinner. When I would go out on a date, I would eat salad, and the guy would be eating a hamburger or steak and fries. After a few dates, with my boyfriend, I ate more like him. I’ve gained weight, but I don’t care. My boyfriend gave me confidence—he really loved me no matter what I looked like. He saw me in sweats and everything. Growing up we get the message that boys are supposed to be physically strong, and girls are supposed to be weak. I think that affects our eating habits.”

—*Letitia, age 17*

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“It’s like you’re not even a real woman if you don’t look beautiful. I think men have more leeway. Even though they are supposed to be built, it is not stressed nearly as much as like all men have to look attractive to be accepted. But for women, I think it’s like you’re not even a real woman if you don’t look beautiful. Look at Woody Allen. He’s a total nerd, but he’s sexy. That is great, but it saddens me that it isn’t that way for women. You have to live up to so much—it’s really frustrating.”

—*Morgan, age 17*

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(Quotes from *Real Girl, Real World: Tools for Finding Your True Self* by Heather Gray and Samantha Philips, Seal Press, 1998; *adiosbarbie.com* and *Real Boys' Voices* by Michael Pollack, Random House, 2000)

Physical Differences Scenarios

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Pam: I'm very uncomfortable with my body. I'm a 15-yearold girl, and my breasts are a size 34AA. I have had my period for over a year, and I'm wondering if I'll ever develop breasts.

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Tasha: I have stretch marks on my breasts and I am overweight for my age. I am scared that when I go to have sex, my partner will be grossed out by them.

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Hector: I am 13 years old and my penis is about 4.5 inches long. Is that big or small on average for my age? Also... is there any way that you can tell how big my penis will probably be? THANKS!

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Yolanda: I have a lot of hair down there. Are guys going to be grossed out by that?

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Paul: What do girls like more, guys who are circumcised or guys who aren't circumcised?

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