Digital Identity: Understanding Body Image and Eating Disorders in a Virtual World

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Disclaimer

Please note that the information in the presentation and power point slides may be triggering to those currently struggling with an eating disorder or in early recovery. Please reach out for support or show self-care if needed.
Agenda

• Understanding Eating Disorders in Adolescents
• Identity and Digital Media
  Understanding the role of digital media in the formation of youthful identities
• Privacy in Public –
  Producing sites, generating images
• Pro Anorexia and Pro Bulimia Websites
• Relationship between Media, Body Dissatisfaction and Disordered Eating
• Support and Treatment – What can we do?
EATING DISORDER RISK FACTORS
(3 P’s)*

• Predisposing Factors
  – Genetic, Family Environment, the effects of environmental adversity, premorbid psychiatric conditions, cultural and societal pressures

• Precipitating Factors
  – Child Abuse, Adversity, Loss, developmental milestones, dieting behavior, body image issues, emotional dysregulation, poverty

• Perpetuating Factors
  – Starvation effects from chronic dieting, unresolved PTSD and ongoing family dysfunction

Understanding ED in Adolescents

Adolescent Profile: Eating Disorder with Co-morbid issues

- Developmental issues
- Trauma
- Self Injury
- Maturity Fears
- PTSD
- Substance Abuse
- Mood
- OCD
- Diabetes
- Poverty
- Parents – Mental Illness

Age Range: 12 years-old to 15 years-old average
IDENTITY
IDENTITY: The Whole Person

BIOLOGICAL

SPIRITUAL

PSYCHOLOGICAL

SOCIAL
Media is providing young people with symbolic resources for constructing and expressing their own identities.

New digital media offer young people the chance to be powerful and express their creativity as media producers.
Understanding the role of digital media in the formation of youthful identities

Internet – popular form of communication and self-expression for adolescents.
- Ages 13 to 19 years old

Up to 2/3 of adolescent girls seek health information online.
– nearly ½ of this group are looking for ways to lose weight; ¼ are seeking information about eating disorders.

50-90% of adolescents accessing the internet at home an average of 10 hours per week.

Young people generate personal sites at more than twice the rate of adults.

Only about 13% of college age students are looking at proana/promia websites – it’s mostly adolescents. ****
Understanding the role of digital media in the formation of youthful identities

• **Social connectedness** – requires new social and communicative skills and new social norms that enable them to regulate these relationships. New means for constructing community – hierarchies are formed, impressions are managed, and social roles are played out.

• **New competencies or forms of “literacy”** – which require and produce new intellectual powers, and even “more complex brain structures.”

• **New Personhood** - it provides new ways of forming identity and hence new forms of personhood;

• **Communication** with different aspects of the self, it enables young people to relate to the world and to others in more powerful ways.
Why Young People Create Personal Sites:

• “Learning by doing” – motivation corresponds developmentally with adolescents growing capacity to set goals and increasing desire to demonstrate autonomy competence.

• Because their friends have: simply share a common experience with their friends.

• “Online presence” proves that they exist in a world that otherwise pays them little attention.
Privacy in Public

- **Belong in public culture** – it is an avenue to participate in, or respond to, a culture that valorizes publicity as an end in itself.

- **Private diaries**: objects for self-examination and engagement.

- **Self-reflection**
  
  “My blog has helped me to center my feelings and realize that I need to take things one step at a time. It forces me to think about who I am, what I like, and who I want to be. I can think about one of the problems I am going to face, but writing about it allows me to work through the problem and start to look at solutions.”
Privacy in Public

Why Young People Create Personal Sites cont’d:

A non-private place to explore personal issues – these authors tend to use pseudonyms and other disguises to safeguard their anonymity.

“The most meaningful comment is when someone writes in and says that they understand what my problem is and they can relate to it. And it just makes me feel good to know that I’m not just doing this freak show online, that people actually do feel the same way I do.”
Why Young People Create Personal Sites cont’d:

• **Sense of obligation** – maintaining the site requires ongoing questions about their own identities as they determine what or what not to post.

• **Release of pent-up feelings** –
  • “My blog keeps taps on me, it helps me to know who I am, what I have done, and how I feel about it.”

• **Feel empowered** – the prospect of mass reception

• **Social Validation and Acceptance** – the choices they make about how they present themselves online are still informed by a society that relies heavily on “fitting in.”
Body Image and Social Media

• Selfies - Appearance in some cases may be the very substance of identity.

• Comparison – “Comparison is the Thief of Joy.”
  Theodore Roosevelt.

• “Likes” – Basing your worth, value and acceptance on the number of “likes” they receive on photos / posts.

• False Sense of Self – creating an identity that is false
Self-Objectification Theory

• A woman’s body is treated as an object
• The pervasiveness of objectification is when girls and women begin to view themselves in the same way.
  – Girls and women gradually learn to adopt an observer’s perspective on their physical selves and to treat themselves as an object to be looked and evaluated on the basis of appearance.
• Habitual and constant self-monitoring of one’s outward appearance
SEXting

• Girls are socialized to think that showing off their sexuality makes them powerful.
SEXTing

• 71% of kids 12 – 17 own cell phones

• New research shows that approximately 20-30 percent of teens have sent and/or received a sext.

• 44% of teens in one study said it’s common for sexts to be shared with someone other than the intended recipient.

• The motives behind the sexting are different – girls do it for attention; boys to upgrade his social status or to be funny.

• It turns kids into objects which can interfere with ability to form rewarding relationships – focused on what they want instead of how they feel.
Questions to Ponder

• Is it impairing intimacy?
  - talking face-to-face, sharing emotions, displaying emotions in close real-life proximity.

• Does it impact our ability to empathize if you can’t feel their real-life emotions?

• Does digital technology isolate or bring together?

• Does it allow for evading and directly resisting adult authority or parental connection/protection?
Dangerous Sites

• Pro Ana and Pro Mia Websites
Pro Ana & Pro Mia Sites

• One study identified a total number of 246 different proanorexia websites
• Websites – lifestyle choice rather than illness
• Share content – thinspiration (images of thin and cachectic women)
• Poetry
• Weight-loss advice
• Methods for avoiding detection by family and health care providers
• Forums
Analyzed 180 websites:
79% were interactive and not static or read only; that is, they allowed a community – users could post comments or art work etc.

60 sites – 58% sites - ED as a “disease;” 42 % ED as a lifestyle “choice.”

Of those sites with age info:
16% maintained by adolescents
66% maintained by young adults (18-24 y.o.)
18% by older adults (25 plus)
85% included explicit “thinspiration” images, tips or techniques. This included:
- 66% fashion models
- 57% celebrities
- 44% real people
- 12% athletes
• 70% offered dieting strategies, including specific dietary regimes and advice on fasting;
• 68% listed “safe” foods or charts with low-calorie foods;
• 50% offered tips on purging or the use of laxatives or diet pills;
• 43% offered advice on how to hide an ed from others.
Put yourself in their shoes

Sanctuary:  Identity is supported, accepted and understood

1. Maintaining “pro-ana” as normal.
3. “Screwed up” – Quick to receive reassurance and support (identities are not too dissimilar to others in real world). - Validation
4. Self-deprecations – accepted
Support and Treatment

Parenting Guidelines
Internet Parenting

Media Literacy

Support and Treatment
Internet Parenting

• Caution should be taken with conducting, researching, or talking about pro anorexia or pro bulimia websites especially with adolescents. – the actual questions or research could provoke or promote such viewership. TALK TO PARENTS FIRST!

• Block websites
• Parents set time restrictions
• Keep computer in a common area so online activity can be supervised
• Talk to them about the dangers
• Daily Monitoring of cell phone (text messaging) and facebook accounts
• Assess use and purpose of internet
Internet Parenting
Keeping kids safe has never been as challenging

Parental control internet software
Alerts for potential IM Predators and Cyberbullies
Social Network User Profile Reports
PC Game Controls with ESRB® Ratings
Filter and Block Secure Websites

Net Nanny
http://www.netnanny.com/

Bluecoat -
http://www1.k9webprotection.com/

www.BSAFE.com
Center for Media Literacy Five Key Questions*

1. Who created this message?
2. What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?
3. How might different people understand this message differently?
4. What values, lifestyles and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?
5. Why is this message being sent?

Center for Media Literacy (www.medialit.org)
* Permission was granted in the use of this information
1. All media messages are constructed.
2. Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.
3. Different people experience the same media message differently.
4. Media have embedded values and points of view.
5. Most media messages are organized to gain profit and/or power.

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Restoring Identity: Key Components to Helping Individuals

• Acceptance
• Validate the wounds
• Understand / Educate re: Biological, Psychological, Social, Spiritual Connection
• Explore the Context and Development of their Body Image – Focus on overevaluation. Promote positive body image
Key Components to Helping Adolescents

• Teach Life Management Skills
  – Mindfulness
  – Emotional Regulation
  – Distress Tolerance
  – Interpersonal Effectiveness
    M. Linehan etc.

• Teach Communication Skills

• Modeling and Promoting Positive Body Image
Body Image Therapy

Identity

Work

Body Image

Work
Positive Body Image

• Promote a Healthy Environment
  – Talk openly, be active, challenge negativity and be positive

• Balanced Eating
  – Don’t diet! All foods fit. No “good” foods, and no “bad” foods.
  – Balance, variety and moderation.
Positive Body Image

• Improve Body Image and Positive Self-Image
  – Monitor and curb talk about your own body and the bodies of others
  – Challenge beliefs about thinness, exercise, “healthy,” dieting, beauty, and so on
  – Post non-sexual images; post inspirational messages; Positive body image posts

• Promote Overall Self-Esteem
  – Engage in healthy and valuable relationships
  – Develop talents, hobbies, and interests that make you feel good about yourself
  – Have fun
Restoring Identity

• Purpose, Meaning and Values

• Asking and Identifying
  – What are the steps to take that would be necessary to align with this value?

• Willingness and Commitment
Our Goal is to help patients find their identity apart from food, weight, size or shape.

To find meaning, value and purpose
Contact Information

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