



**MEDIA  
AWARENESS  
NETWORK**

[www.media-awareness.ca](http://www.media-awareness.ca)

**Level:** Grades 8-9

**About the Author**

From the award-winning Violence-Prevention Curriculum Healthy Relationships, produced by the Nova Scotia advocacy group *Men For Change*.

**Lesson Plan**

**The Impact of Gender Role Stereotypes**

**Overview**

This is the third of three lessons that address gender stereotypes. The objective of these lessons is to encourage students to develop their own critical intelligence with regard to culturally inherited stereotypes, and to the images presented in the media — film and television, rock music, newspapers and magazines.

The lesson begins with a discussion about how self-violence may be promoted by the fashion industry when men and women put their health at risk to attain impossible standards of attractiveness and thinness. Students also explore how stereotypes about masculinity can fuel male violence.

**Learning Outcomes**

Students will:

- recognize the potentially damaging effects of living up to stereotypes, and how they can lead to abuse and violence against ourselves and others;
- understand that "going along with the crowd" can involve sacrificing one's own principles (which is one way of being aggressive towards oneself), as well as infringing on the rights of others;
- explore and practice a positive approach to situations involving peer pressure.

**Preparation and Materials**

- A magazine photo of a thin woman, for distribution or overhead projection.
- Copies of newspaper articles
  - *The Beautiful, the Bulemic and the Dead*
  - *Pondering Manhood's Price*
  - and *Starve and Binge*
- Hand out copies of *Thinness Statistics* to students.
- Recommended resources: The NFB's *Killing Us Softly* (film) and *Still Killing Us Softly* (video), *Toughguise* (video).

## Procedure

### Background:

When we unconsciously try to live up to the unattainable standards of the stereotype we can do physical and emotional harm to ourselves. Often, we don't notice this because we tend to mould ourselves to fit these stereotypes as a matter of course. This can be damaging. A boy with a very slight build who wants to be muscle-bound is fighting against himself if he tries to change his physique to match that of the stereotypical male. A girl who has an angular nose can fall into the same trap if she listens to her friends and/or relatives who are trying to convince her she needs a nose job.

It takes conviction and self-assurance to accept oneself despite of the disapproval of others. The first step is seeing that beliefs in stereotypes stem from a weak sense of self. Being accepted by others, as desirable as it may be, is not as important as self-acceptance. The activities in this lesson are designed to help students see the harmful effects of believing in gender stereotypes.

### Activity 3.1: Dying to be Thin

**Introduction:** There is another way that male and female stereotypes lead to violence. They portray the perfect face, the perfect body, the ideal build images that are totally cool. We tend to want to be like them. We want to look like the woman on the cover of Seventeen or high fashion models or the men that we see in commercials, in the movies, and on TV. If we are not careful, we can begin to lose self-esteem, because we want to be like someone else — our media heroes.

What does this have to do with violence? It means not liking who we are. This is a subtle form of violence towards ourselves, rather than the more obvious violence towards others that we have been exploring so far. The next step is that we begin to expect and want others to fit these stereotypes too — we begin to like the stereotypes more than real people, and so we try to fit our friends into these boxes. This causes lots of problems in relationships.

**Note:** *Students may need help with this point because there is a big difference between thinking somebody else looks good, and wanting to be like them. It's important for us to fundamentally like the way we are.*

- Show photos of "fashionably" thin women from any women's magazine on an overhead projector or as handouts.

Ask students:

- How does this person live up to the "ideal" standards found in the stereotype box (*from the lessons Exposing Gender Stereotypes and Learning Gender Stereotypes*)?
- How is she successful at being a woman according to these norms?
- What is the connection between ads like this and eating disorders?
- Do you think women would want to be thin if they were not bombarded with thin images of women, like this, in the media?

- How do these Caucasian standards for body image differ from standards for other cultural groups, such as: African Canadians, Inuit or various Asian cultural groups? (*Consider that the vast majority of models have white skin.*)  
**Note:** *In some cultures, heavy body weight is considered to be a sign of beauty and healthiness!*
- What about at different times in history? Has the thin woman always been the ideal? (*Paintings that pre-date this century often depict full-bodied women. The women Matisse painted were anything but thin!*)

Women's preoccupation with the beauty myth is evident in most cultures that consume television and other media influences. Sadly, more and more women want to be the stereotypical ideal, and they are preoccupied with either getting thin or staying thin. For many young girls, it starts as early as elementary school.

This is a form of violence that women do to themselves. Excessive dieting can not only damage the organs by robbing the body of essential nutrients, it can cause death. The "dying to be thin" mindset also fosters a very unhealthy set of attitudes, which affect relationships, both now and in the future.

- How would you define the eating disorders known as anorexia nervosa and bulimia? (*Anorectics pursue thinness through extreme dieting and excessive exercise, while bulimics eat out of control and then purge themselves by vomiting, fasting, taking laxatives, and exercising.*)
- Read to the class, or distribute for individual or group study and discussion, the newspaper article, *The Beautiful, the Bulemic and the Dead*

**Closure:** The violence we can do to ourselves if we unknowingly accept these stereotypes can be very subtle. We don't have to look like Hollywood or soap opera stars. They put a huge amount of effort into maintaining a certain look, and they get paid lots of money for their trouble. What does that have to do with us? We're leading ordinary lives in the real world, yet for some reason we have a hankering to be like them. It's important to understand why there are so many women who are suffering with eating disorders. First, it can help us avoid falling into the same pitfalls, and, secondly, it can help us feel empathy for those who do suffer from these disorders.

**Extension:** Use the newspaper article *Starve and Binge* for homework or group discussion.

### Activity 3.2: Pondering Manhood's Price

- Display stereotype boxes from the first two lessons.

**Introduction:** The impact of gender stereotypes on women is that they have to be a certain way in order to fit into the stereotype box. For men and boys, the pressure to conform to the gender stereotype takes the form of pressure to do or act in certain ways. Physical ability is very important in becoming a man, and it is often used to prove one's manhood. Men are violent to other men. "Gay bashing," sports activities (like the World Wrestling Federation), and certain initiation rituals are physical — often abusive — reminders that to be a real man, you must be the toughest to survive.

## Men's Violence Against Men

Ask your students:

- What do men do physically to prove that they are "real men?"
- Let's look at our Act Like A Man stereotype box. If you are a victim of bullying, or sexual abuse, how do the attitudes in this box make it difficult for you to talk about your problems?
- What names will you be called if you talk?

These stereotypes push an unhealthy message on men: When we get hurt, we take it in, keep it in, don't ever tell anyone. When we raise a child to take the pain, keep it to himself, and to not show any feelings, we're training an emotional time bomb. What is going to happen when this person finds himself getting mad or upset about something at the age of 17 or 18 or 20?

When we hear "men's violence against other men," we typically think of blatant acts of aggression, like hitting, stabbing, or gunning down. But there are a lot of other forms of violence we don't normally think of. Take initiations, for instance.

Ask your students:

- What do we mean by initiation?
- Define "initiation," and call students' attention to initiations in sports. Give two examples:
  1. Heat Liniment: Heat liniment is poured down the front of the new team member's shorts in the locker room. One student in Brookfield, N.S. was reportedly sent to hospital with second degree burns.
  2. Peanut Butter Jog: The new team member goes jogging with peanut butter smeared on his under arm. When he returns from the jog, he has to eat the peanut butter with crackers while his team members watch.
    - Have you heard about other initiations in sports?
    - Why is it important in this type of initiation for the person to be uncomfortable?
    - What does discomfort have to do with being a "real man?" (**Note:** According to the male stereotype, men have to prove that they're tough; that they can take it; that they're not sissies so the best way to know if someone is a "real man" [i.e., one of the guys] is to put him to the test, which involves making him suffer.)
    - Distribute *Pondering Manhood's Price* for in-class use or homework.

**Extension:** To learn more about how the media promotes stereotypes about masculinity, show the video *Toughguise* to students.

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### Related Lessons on the Media Awareness Web site

- *Exposing Gender Stereotypes*
- *Learning Gender Stereotypes*
- *The Impact of Gender Stereotypes*

## Student Handout #1

### **The Beautiful, the Bulemic and the Dead**

*By Bill Maxwell*

WHEN I bought a copy of Madonna's book *Sex* last year, some of my colleagues and students complained that the Material Girl was ruining America's youth, especially our highly impressionable teen-age girls.

I disagreed then that Madonna is ruining our girls and I still disagree with such a facile claim.

We need not worry about Madonna's transparent persona. We do need to worry, however, about the likes of Princess Diana, Cher, Melanie Griffith, Liz Taylor, Kim Alexis, Carol Alt, Jane Fonda, La Toya Jackson, Dolly Parton, Mary Tyler Moore, Mariel Hemingway, Morgan Fairchild and other big name females who will go to almost any lengths to enhance their physical appearance.

Some women, like Cher, undergo disfiguration for the sake of beauty. Talking about her silicone implants, Cher told *People* magazine in January 1992 that her "breast operations were a nightmare. They were really botched in every way. If anything, they were worse after than before."

But the gruesomeness of Cher's botched implantations doesn't compare (in my estimation) to the grotesqueness of Joan Rivers' operation that helped her skim off unwanted fat. She had liposuction, the technique in which body fat in tissue beneath the epidermis is sucked out through a tube.

Face and eye lifts, nose jobs, cheek and jaw alterations, neck tightening and tummy tucks are the most conspicuous and most talked-about reconstructions among Hollywood's youth and beauty cultists.

These operations are expensive: *People* magazine estimated that in 1990, face lifts cost an average of \$1,200 - \$8000; tummy tucks \$1,200 - \$8,500; rhinoplasty (nosejobs) \$300 - \$6,000; breast augmentations \$1000 - \$5000.

For the sake of physical beauty, Hollywood stars go under the knife almost as routinely as they switch agents. People wrote of the hundreds of celebrities whom teen-age girls emulate.

But for all of the negative press that celebrity plastic surgery receives, the most dangerous — and deadliest — beauty-related vanity is the obsession with thinness. To shed pounds celebrities diet and starve themselves. Again, teens, seeing Twiggy-like frames, try to look like their favourite stars by refusing to eat properly.

Singer Karen Carpenter, who died of anorexia-related heart failure 10 years ago, remains a powerful reminder of the tragedy caused by eating disorders. Carpenter, weighing 85 pounds when she died, thought she was fat.

Similarly, Tracey Gold of ABC's sitcom "Growing Pains" was heading for trouble. She is alive today perhaps because her mother, on visiting her daughter's dressing room, was shocked to see the girl's 5 foot three-inch, 90-pound skeleton. The mother forced her daughter to begin eating properly.

On March 21, Jennifer Ann Hines, a 21-year-old University of Florida cheerleader, was found dead in her home near campus. Friends say that Hines, who was obsessed with thinness, suffered from bulimia, an eating disorder characterized by cycles of bingeing and purging the stomach by induced vomiting or use of laxatives. At the time of her death, Hines weighed 87 pounds.

Experts report that more than 8 million Americans, mostly women, are anorexic or bulimic and about 150,000 die each year of complications from these disorders.

Why do so many American females destroy their health and risk their lives? They do it for the sake of fulfilling society's demand for physical attractiveness and the so-called perfect body.

In her bestselling book *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf shows how society's definitions and images of beauty are used against women.

Contrary to rejecting physical beauty as a desirable goal, as her critics have claimed, Wolf urges women not to let the quest for beauty become another form of enslavement, not to let the quest undermine them in their professions, not to let it alienate them from their own bodies and sexuality. Instead, Wolf wants women to become self-determining, to define beauty for themselves.

The reigning Miss USA, Kenya Moore, a sophomore attending Wayne State University in Detroit, has discovered a source of self-esteem worth emulating. "Everything comes from within me," she told *Jet* magazine recently. "Real beauty is within. Inner beauty comes from what the soul says and how you treat other people."

### **Questions: "The Beautiful, the Bulimic and the Dead"**

1. Why does the author criticize popular female movie and fashion stars?



## **Pondering Manhood's Price**

*By Peter Duffy*

IT'S NOT ALWAYS easy being a male. Sometimes it can be darned painful. I was 11 when I was initiated.

I'd just won a scholarship to an all-male grammar school. At that tender age, everything was new and intimidating. But what scared me most was "the new boy initiation." Gangs of older boys roamed the playgrounds at recess hunting us first-year kids. We were easy prey.

Once we were caught, we'd be dragged off to a quiet spot where we'd be held with our legs apart. The leader would then knee us in the testicles. That was our initiation.

I managed to avoid it for three weeks. Then I finally gave myself up, just to get it over with. It hurt like hell.

The memory welled up while I was attending the recent Atlantic Sexuality Conference at Mount Saint Vincent University. I was in a seminar being given by a professor named Blye Frank. His topic was "Young Men and Masculinity" and focused on how our sexuality is molded over time by the social process.

He spoke of young men denied an education because of "the pecking order of masculinity." He said some university frosh initiations — such as being hogtied naked and dumped in the women's residence — can cause such deep humiliation to some young men they drop silently out of school. "Boys will be boys" is the excuse for much of this, he said, but that's an attitude which merely prolongs a socialization process which must change.

Blye showed us a movie which focused on how the advertising industry promotes sexism. What we saw suggested a man is in danger of becoming merely a reflection of what he wears, how he looks and what he reads.

The film showed advertising which suggests a man finds success through advancement in the workplace while a woman achieves her potential by pleasing her man.

This stereotyping is a limiting state of affairs which damages everyone, especially men, said Blye. "It hurts men. It makes it hard for us to express ourselves emotionally, leaves us obsessed with power and control."

We heard that self-image is created early, that kids today aren't empty vessels. Young boys learn that to let a woman make decisions is to let her "wear the pants in the family." The male comes to admire women at a distance, to ogle them. Women learn to accept it and believe that it's okay.

The seminar left me ambivalent. My "female side" had been outraged, but the rest of me was irritable and defensive.

I went to lunch and mused. Just how much of me CAN I change? Just how much of me do I even WANT to change? I'm very comfortable being a man, thank you.

And yet, what if I don't change? In that case, do I give tacit approval to a system that terrorized me as a young male? Do I really want to perpetuate a socializing process that condones young boys being kneed in the groin?

I don't think I do. And yet I have mixed feelings when I relive the actual incident. As awful as it was, once it was over I realized I'd paid some kind of dues and had become part of a special club that went beyond school.

I'm proud to say I never used my "membership" to hurt others at the school. I'm less proud to say I never spoke out against the terrorism either.

As a male, I guess that's part of what I'm being challenged to take stock of now. It's not easy.

### **Inquiry: "Pondering Manhood's Price"**

**1.** Can you think of an initiation that is non-violent in nature? Do all initiations have to be violent?

**2.** The writer says, "This stereotyping is a limiting state of affairs which damages everyone, especially men." Why does he say, "especially men?" What about women?



## **Starve and Binge**

*By Clare Mellor*

*CRAVING CONTROL: People with eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia use food to satisfy their craving for a sense of control. They have an intense fear of being fat and pursue thinness through restrictive dieting, excessive exercise and binge eating and purging.*

She was on a high. The more weight she lost, the higher she got. Dieting gave her the sense of control she craved. Her tiny frame, leaning anxiously forward, Susan recalls the day she began starving herself. She and her sister, whom she always believed was "prettier and skinnier," had a contest to see who could lose five pounds first.

"I kept saying, five more pounds, just five more pounds,' but five pounds was never enough." says Susan, who has been battling the eating disorder anorexia nervosa for 10 years.

At 28, Susan, who has frequently been hospitalized, still weighs 65 pounds and suffers permanent kidney damage from the illness. "It used to be nothing else mattered. If I ate a meal and gained weight I would feel like sitting down and dying. That's changing ... (but) I still don't cope very well ... If I eat half a muffin and an apple, I feel very guilty."

Anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa are eating disorders seen 90 - 95 per cent of the time in females and usually begin during "periods of adjustment" in early adolescence or late teenage years, says David Pilon of the Victoria General Hospital's Eating Disorder Clinic. Both involve an intense fear of being fat. Anorexics pursue thinness through restrictive dieting and excessive exercise.

"You're feeling all the time like all that matters is that number on the scale and how much you can get away without eating. Constantly, I was thinking, how can I avoid this meal, how can I avoid that meal?' I was so hungry I couldn't sleep. All I could dream about was food," says Susan.

Bulimics are caught in a cycle of dieting and binge eating.

Binges are followed by some form of getting rid of eaten food. Many bulimics vomit, but laxatives, fasting and exercise are also purging methods, says Pilon. Some bulimics will purge 15 - 20 times a day

People with eating disorders may have high energy but eventually develop a host of physical problems such as kidney damage, intestinal problems, loss of menstruation and, in bulimics, loss of tooth enamel.

Causes of eating disorders are complex, and there are numerous contributing factors, says Pilon, such as sociocultural and family pressures. Nearly always, there's low self esteem and concerns with identity, says Pilon.

Susan, who lacked confidence when she was growing up because she had a visual impairment, says that despite being an A student, she didn't feel good at anything until she started dieting.

"My sister didn't last on the diet but the weight just fell off me," she says. "It was such a sense of control."

"As a child, I was upset that I couldn't do what other kids could do but that was never allowed to be expressed. I grow up in a home where they didn't want to see anything but smiles on your face .... Eating was something I had control over .... After that point, I felt I could have control over anything in my life."

A strong sense of self-worth is vital, especially since females are constantly bombarded by "ideal" images of femininity and thinness in fashion magazines and the media.

"It does influence you. But if you have a strong sense of yourself, you're not going to fall into that," says Susan.

Besides learning not to use food to wage war on themselves, people with eating disorders need counseling to deal with low self-esteem, identity problems, and interpersonal issues, says Pilon, noting the VC clinic sees 60 - 70 new eating disorder referrals each year.

People with eating disorders can recover with treatment, but they will likely always carry sensitivities around the issues of body-image and self-esteem, says Pilon.

Janet Beaton, who has made a slow, painful recovery from bulimia, has spent the last few years helping people with eating disorders and their families.

Beaton, who regularly gives talks at schools, says low self-esteem often isn't recognized early enough by teachers and parents.

Talking to children and finding ways to help them deal with and express feelings is essential, she says.

"You really have to start early with issues such as self-esteem. It's important for a parent to let a child make some decisions for themselves ... If they want to wear stripes with polka dots let them," she says.

One of the theories surrounding anorexia is that at puberty the person has a fear of growing up and wants to remain free of responsibility. "She was afraid of her changing body and would cry about her hips," says Donna. "By dieting, she was dieting the curves away. The curves were gone. She was straight up and down and therefore not subject to anyone's opinion."

Donna, who says her daughter is constantly angry at her, says parents of children with eating disorders must go through their own recovery process.

"When it happened, I was devastated. There is a certain amount of shame attached to it. You think it has to be the parents' fault .... Now ... I realize it's the way my daughter feels about herself."

Beaton says some of the stigma around eating disorders is lifted when children and teens actually see "someone (who had an eating disorder) who is not ashamed of it."

Anorexics and bulimics often develop body distortions, seeing themselves as fat, even though their weight is dangerously low. Those who try to help them are often seen as "the enemy," conspiring to make them obese.

"She would stare at her hands ... and say she was fat," says Donna, a Halifax mother whose 14-year-old daughter is in hospital with anorexia.

"She would look in the mirror ... turn this way and that way and cry about herself and say how fat she was. In actuality, she had an absolutely beautiful shape."

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