

BECOMING A CRITICAL MEDIA VIEWER

Media messages about body shape and size will affect the way we feel about ourselves and our bodies only if we let them. One of the ways we can protect our self-esteem and body image from the media's often narrow definitions of beauty and acceptability is to become a critical viewer of the media messages we are bombarded with each day. When we effectively recognize and analyze the media messages that influence us, we remember that the media's definitions of beauty and success do not have to define our self-image or potential.

To be a Critical Viewer, remember:

- ❖ All media images and messages are constructions. They are NOT reflections of reality. Advertisements and other media messages have been carefully crafted with an intent to send a very specific message.
- ❖ Advertisements are created to do one thing: convince you to buy or support a specific product or service.
- ❖ To convince you to buy a specific product or service, advertisers will often construct an emotional experience that looks like reality. Remember, you are only seeing what the advertisers want you to see.
- ❖ Advertisers create their message based on what they think you will want to see and what they think will affect you and compel you to buy their product. Just because they think their approach will work with people like you doesn't mean it has to work with you as an individual.

To help promote healthier body image messages in the media, you can:

- ❖ Talk back to the TV when you see an ad or hear a message that makes you feel bad about yourself or your body by promoting only thin body ideals.
- ❖ Write a letter to an advertiser you think is sending positive, inspiring messages that recognize and celebrate the natural diversity of human body shapes and sizes. Reinforce their courage to send positive, affirming messages.
- ❖ Tear out the pages of your magazine that contain advertisements or articles glorifying thinness or degrading people of larger sizes. Enjoy your magazine without negative media messages about your body.
- ❖ Talk to your friends about media messages and the way they make you feel.
- ❖ Make a list of companies who consistently send negative body image messages and make a conscious effort to avoid buying their products. Write them a letter explaining why you are using your "buying power" to protest their messages. Tell you family and friends about your choices.

Facts About the Media's Influence In Our Lives:

- According to a recent survey of adolescent girls, the media is their main source of information about women's health issues (Commonwealth Fund, 1997)
- Researchers estimate that 60% of middle school girls read at least one fashion magazine regularly (Levine, 1997)
- ❖ Another study of mass media magazines discovered that women's magazines had 10.5 times more advertisements and articles promoting weight loss than men's magazines did (as cited in Guillen 7 & Barr, 1994)
- ❖ A study of one teen adolescent magazine over the course of 20 years found that:
 - all of the articles contained in these magazines included statements highlighting that weight loss would improve appearance
 - in articles about fitness or exercise plans, 74% cited "to become attractive" as a reason to start exercising and 51% noted the need to lose weight or burn calories. (Guillen & Barr, 1994)
- A study of 4,294 network television commercials revealed that one out of every 3.8 commercials send some sort of "attractiveness message," telling viewers what is or is not attractive (as cited in Myers et al., 1992)

References:

The Commonwealth Fund. (1997). *In Their Own Words: Adolescent Girls Discuss Health and Health Care Issues*.

Guillen & Barr. (1994). *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 15, 464-472.

Levine. (1997). *Plenary Presentation at the Third Annual Eating Disorders on Campus Conference*, Penn State University.

Myers et al. (1992). *Journal of Communication*, 42, 108 – 133.



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