

research snapshot

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Negative comments about weight, from a peer, can impact how a young woman views her body .



What is this research about?

Along with her parents and the media, a young woman's peers – people of the same age group, who share similar concerns – can have a strong impact on how she views herself. Evidence shows that young women form smaller and more intimate relationships with their peers than men do. It has been suggested, then, that negative comments on a young woman's weight, from a peer, may cause her to have a negative view of her body. No studies, however, have demonstrated this – until now.

What did the researchers do?

Researchers from York University and McMaster University looked at 138 female undergraduate students in psychology between the ages of 18 and 24. Young women in this age group tend to diet a lot and are often dissatisfied with their bodies. During the study, each young woman received negative feedback about her weight from a peer. One of the researchers, presenting herself as an undergraduate psychology student, purposely guessed the weight of each woman to be 15 lbs *more*

What you need to know:

When it comes from a peer, a negative comment about a young woman's weight can make her feel unhappy with her body – even when the young woman is not overly concerned with her weight. This is the first study to demonstrate how negative comments, from peers, impact a young woman's body image.

than it actually was (the women had been weighed the week before). The researchers then looked at the mood and self-esteem of the women as well as how they viewed their bodies. After the study, the researchers reassured the young women that they had been *intentionally* overestimating the young women's weight.

What did the researchers find?

The researchers found that among the women they looked at, the 'restrained eaters' – those who are very aware of their weight and tend to diet – felt more depressed, 'fatter', and unhappy with their

bodies after receiving negative comments from a peer. But these ‘restrained eaters,’ as well as women who weigh more than others, are not the only ones who are vulnerable to critical words about their weight. When it comes from a peer, a negative comment can alter the body image of women who are ‘normal’ eaters and seemingly less concerned with how much they weigh. Weight concerns, then, appear to be common among young women.

How can you use this research?

This study – the first of its kind – helps us to better understand how comments about a young woman’s weight, from a peer, can have a harmful impact on how that woman views her body. Future studies should draw from a larger pool of participants and should consider whether or not a young woman’s ethnicity plays a role in how she responds to negative comments about her weight. Future studies should also aim to define what a ‘peer’ is and see if negative comments from a peer affect a woman’s actual eating habits.

About the Researchers

Dr. Jennifer S. Mills is Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology, York University. Jessie L. Miller is a former undergraduate honours student in Psychology at York. This Research Snapshot is from their study, “Experimental effects of receiving negative weight-related feedback: A weight guessing study”. It is published in *Body Image* 4 (2007): 309-16. jsmills@yorku.ca

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Behavioural Psychology, social psychology, body image, gender, media.

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