Topic 4: Body image fact sheet

> *'I know I'm overweight. I hate the way I look and I feel ugly all the time. When I look in the mirror, I cry. Diets don't work. I feel really depressed!*
>
> Jasmine, aged 15

> *'I've tried, I really have. I know I'm overweight and my skin looks awful. My acne is just horrible. I hate games and PE as I look so big and clumsy compared to my mates."*
>
> Jason, aged 13

> *'I try to keep to one meal a day. My mum thinks I have breakfast but I don't and I spend my lunch money on sweets for my friends. I know it's wrong but I can't tell anyone. I feel ugly all the time.*
>
> Tashane, aged 15

Body image

Many young people, like those above, have negative views of their body. Puberty can be an especially confusing time as your body goes through so many changes. Many of the images we see in the media can create an unrealistic idea of how the 'perfect' body should be. In reality, we all come in different shapes and sizes and there is no 'perfect' body or image.

We can always compare ourselves to others and think 'I wish I was taller, thinner, stronger, had straight hair' etc. But this will only make us feel bad about ourselves, and it is important to accept and care for our bodies.

Healthy body, healthy mind

By taking care of your body, it can help you to feel good about yourself. Being underweight can lead to problems like lack of energy, stunted growth, depression, infertility, blotchy skin, thinning hair, and more. Being overweight can lead to depression, heart problems, diabetes and high blood pressure. That's why it is important to try and maintain a healthy weight.

Eating a balanced diet and keeping physically fit can help you to look and feel great!

Healthy diet

A healthy diet means eating a wide range of foods so you get all the nutrients you need, and eating the right number of calories for how active you are. Your body needs energy and nutrients from food to grow and to work properly. If you don't eat a healthy, balanced diet, you could be putting your health, body and growth at risk. A healthy diet doesn't mean giving up all your favourite foods. In fact, you need to beware of fad diets: they're rarely the way to a healthy weight. Instead, use our tips to help you eat healthily

- ✓ Don't skip breakfast
- ✓ Make sure you drink enough fluids
- ✓ Aim to eat at least five portions of a variety of fruits and vegetables a day
- ✓ If you're feeling tired and run down, you may need more iron in your diet
- ✓ If you often feel hungry, try eating more high-fibre foods such as wholemeal bread, fruit and beans
- ✓ At snack time, swap foods that are high in saturated fat or sugars for healthier choices.

Keeping active

Keeping physically fit can also help you to maintain a healthy weight and can make you feel great! Although you might not feel like doing exercise when you get home from school, sitting on the sofa will only make you feel more tired. Exercise can give you more energy and help to avoid putting on weight!

There's no need to be a fitness fanatic. Exercise doesn't have to mean a cross-country run, or a killer regime at the gym. You could start by simply walking more. If you're feeling more adventurous, there are heaps of other fun activities that you could do, like football, dance, swimming and cycling.

Getting help

If you're worried about your weight, want more advice about eating healthily and keeping active, or feel down about your body image, then there is lots of information and help out there.

NHS Choices (www.nhs.uk/livewell) provides lots of useful information and advice about eating healthily and keeping fit. There is a teen girl and teen boy section. There are also tools you can use to check your weight.

ChildLine (www.childline.org.uk) is an email, text and telephone helpline. There is lots of useful information on their website, or you can speak to a counsellor for advice.

Expert help

There are many healthcare professionals that help young people to deal with problems around weight and body image.

Here are typical days in the lives of two experts.

A day as a dietitian

I work at the local hospital. My day starts at my out-patient clinic. The first appointment is a child who is struggling with her weight. After talking to the parents and child, I plan a suitable diet which helps the child to gain weight. I also see patients with diabetes, a woman who has a stomach disease, and a lady who has raised cholesterol levels.

At the end of the clinic, I return to the department office and sort out messages from the ward and, after lunch, I attend a multidisciplinary team meeting on the ward to discuss the progress of patients in my care. After this, I give a talk to parents and teachers at a local school which is trying to encourage a healthy food culture. They are all really keen to hear what I say, and it is great to be able to answer all their questions and apply my detailed knowledge of food and nutrition.

A day as a clinical psychologist

I work at a local mental health trust, offering counselling, therapy and advice to a wide-range of people with mental health problems.

I begin the day meeting with colleagues including other psychologists, occupational therapists, nurses and psychiatrists to discuss the progress of my patients.

After the meeting, I see my first patient of the day who is a teenage girl suffering from an eating disorder that has been referred to me by her GP. I carry out psychometric tests and try to establish why she is feeling and acting negatively. I also speak to the girl's family and recommend regular counselling sessions.

I assess several more patients throughout the day, including a challenging session with an alcoholic mother. I finish at 5.00pm, having enjoyed engaging with such a wide variety of people and gaining insights into human behaviour and personality.

Do these jobs sound appealing? If so, the Step into the NHS website provides more information about these and many other careers in the health sector. Visit www.stepintothenhs.nhs.uk and search careers by A-Z.