



“Thin Ideal”

When you look at the research on eating disorders, the phrase “thin ideal” shows up over and over again. In particular, it comes up in research on risk factors for developing an eating disorder - so it’s clearly central to eating disorder prevention. But what actually is the thin ideal, and why is it so toxic?

When researchers refer to the thin ideal, they mean the culturally accepted image of an idealized woman’s body - which is thin, slender, and toned. The thin ideal is reinforced by the images of bodies we see on TV, social media, in movies, magazines, and advertisements, and by cultural messaging that tells us beauty comes in only one size. The thin ideal tells us that being attractive, or even worthwhile, requires having one particular (thin) body shape.

Everyone is exposed to the thin ideal – it’s part of the diet culture we’re all swimming in - but the interesting thing is that it has the most power only when it’s internalized. When we internalize the thin ideal, that means we essentially adopt the culturally idealized body as our own personal standard for beauty and strive to achieve it – despite the fact that its standard of thinness is extremely difficult for the vast majority of people to reach using healthy means.

In episode #17 of the Full Bloom Podcast, we discussed the thin ideal with a true expert, Dr. Eric Stice, who has researched and published extensively on the thin ideal and eating disorder risk factors for over 20 years. He also developed the Body Project, an eating disorder prevention program based on his findings that’s been implemented with over 4 million young girls in 139 countries.

His research has found that when a teenage girl, for example, internalizes the thin ideal, it is an initial risk factor that then contributes to dissatisfaction with her own body, which then can lead to dieting, as well as mood problems like depression and anxiety – all factors which increase risk for the onset of eating disorders.

However, he’s also found that when people are able to *avoid* internalizing the thin ideal and can resist the cultural pressure to be thin, their overall risk of developing issues with eating is lessened. Because internalization of the thin ideal is the beginning of a cascade of other risk factors, targeting it leads to significant reduction of risk overall.

We know that unrealistic cultural ideals of beauty surround us, and that they can contribute to serious negative outcomes for body image and eating disorders, especially for vulnerable teen girls. But we’ve found it empowering to see the research – that avoiding that initial step of *internalizing* the thin ideal is a powerful way of fortifying our children and ourselves against risk.

By The Full Bloom Project
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