



# How to... **'boost body image with exercise'**



## *Why it's important*

Body image is a person's thoughts and feelings about their physical appearance and is overwhelmingly poor in the UK, where the vast majority of young women report that they are highly dissatisfied with their bodies. Negative body image is associated with low self-esteem, emotional distress and depression, as well as being a risk factor for eating disorders.

Exercise has been identified as a potential strategy to improve body image dissatisfaction. However, as a number of important factors have been shown to affect the way young women feel about their bodies during exercise, it is important that any activities promoting exercise are delivered with these factors in mind, so young women are likely to have a more positive, rather than worse, body image after engaging in exercise. This is more likely to result in sustained exercise participation.



## ***Body image as a barrier to exercise***

In the UK, far fewer young women than men engage in any exercise. As many girls are dissatisfied with their bodies, they are likely to avoid exercise to prevent them feeling even more conscious of their bodies. This is because they are anxious that their bodies will be negatively judged by others, regardless of their actual body weight and shape. There are several factors that can influence young women to exercise:

### **Knowing it's okay to sweat!**

The media typically features pictures of women who are free from perspiration and make exercise look 'effortless'. Consequently, many young women will be reluctant to engage in any exercise because they feel they will look 'unfeminine' and 'unattractive' while they exercise. It is therefore important that young women can see that not only is it perfectly normal to find exercising strenuous, but this is in fact when the positive effects of exercise occur.

*"Everyone's wearing the same type of clothes, everyone's sweating, everyone's looking not very attractive. You just get comfortable with it."*

**Kerry, aged 16**

*"I didn't wanna get all sweaty, ugh!"*

**Louisa, aged 19**

### **Seeing diversity in size and shape**

The majority of the media features slim and toned women exercising who often wear revealing clothing. As a result, young women are likely to feel as though they will not look like an 'exerciser' or are not 'sporty' enough, and will feel intimidated by the prospect of exercising. It is therefore essential that young women understand that there is no specific body type that is healthy, but rather that being healthy can come in a range of body sizes, and contrary to the popular belief, you can be very thin and unfit, or overweight and healthy.

*"I didn't even wanna come...I'm not the sporty type"*

**Geeta, aged 16**

Tip: Any media promoting exercise should therefore feature a realistic representation of exercisers in terms of size, weight and shape, as well as women of a range of exercising abilities.



# Can exercise improve body image in young women?

Research has consistently found that engaging in exercise is generally associated with improvements to body image satisfaction in young women.

## Case study

A Swedish study by Lindwall and Lingren (2006) aimed to increase body image in 56 girls aged 13–20 from communities of low socio-economic status. The girls were able to choose from a wide range of activities (such as badminton, kick-boxing, aerobics, netball and yoga). It was proposed that by giving the girls more control over the type of exercise they engaged in, they were more likely to enjoy the activities, feel more confident while exercising, and experience enhanced feelings of belonging. The exercise programme was run twice a week for six months, and each session included a minute exercise session and a 15-minute discussion where issues about healthy lifestyles were discussed. The intervention was found to be successful as the girls reported an increase in body image satisfaction. Furthermore, these changes occurred independently of any changes to body mass index (BMI) or physical fitness.

## Who benefits the most from exercise?

A review of the research in this area has concluded that adolescents report greater improvements to body image satisfaction from exercise than other age groups. In particular, research shows that young women who have not participated in much sport or exercise in the past, or those who are overweight or obese, are likely to report the greatest improvements from body image. Additionally, individuals with the poorest body image also report greater improvements in terms of body image. This is thought to be because these individuals



Us Girls Project, Hastings

have the most room for improvement in how they feel about their appearance because they will see rapid improvements in their physical fitness and experience feelings of confidence once they start exercising.



## What causes these improvements to body image?

Although exercise is found to increase body image satisfaction, less is known about precisely why these changes occur. There are, however, several factors that have been shown to play an important role:

### Physical versus perceived changes to the body

There is a common assumption that improvements to body image satisfaction only occur because of physical changes to the body. In theory, young women will experience substantial increases to their body image satisfaction after exercise brings them closer to the societal ideal (ie slim and toned). However, research has actually demonstrated that changes in body composition (such as BMI, percentage of body fat or body weight) play a relatively minor role in increasing body image satisfaction. The same has been found for physical fitness.

Instead, it appears that perceptions of physical fitness and body composition, rather than actual, can lead to significant increases in body image satisfaction. This suggests that young women must feel as though their bodies are becoming fitter through exercise, even if there are very little visible physical changes.

**Tip:** It may therefore be beneficial if exercise sessions allow the young women to discuss ways in which they feel their bodies have improved since starting the Us Girls projects (however big or small these changes may actually be). Efforts should therefore be made to encourage exercisers to list a number of positive changes in their fitness, and physical and mental health.

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*“Seeing my fitness improve just makes me wanna push more and more.”*

**Amy, aged 16**

### Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is very important in the effects of exercise on body image, and refers to one’s beliefs about their own capabilities with specific activities. For instance, a young woman with high self-efficacy would be very confident that she could complete a 5k run. As with perceived changes to the body, improvements to body image would occur as a result of the sense of personal control and competence with one’s body that is gained from exercise participation.



To improve feelings of self-efficacy in exercise, it is essential to regularly set small and realistically achievable activities that lead to increased feelings of competence. This may include setting achievable goals. Two examples of this are:

- Learning a specific new skill (such as using a particular piece of equipment, a dance move, or a specific distance to cover).
- Setting exercise goals in terms of attendance.

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*“I’ve learnt that if you put your mind to it, you can do it.”*

**Kerry, aged 16**

### Important factors to consider

Although it is best to tailor each Us Girls project to the women’s preferences, the following factors have been shown to be particularly effective in eliciting improvements in body image:

#### Which ‘FITT principles’?

Exercise prescriptions typically consist of four components: frequency (the number of exercise sessions per week); intensity (eg mild, moderate or heavy); time (the duration of each exercise session); and type (the specific mode of exercise), which are known as the ‘FITT principles’.

#### Frequency

Sessions that are more frequent are associated with greater improvements in body image satisfaction. This would ideally be two or three sessions a week. It may be useful to provide the girls with workouts that they could complete within their own time.



## Intensity

Moderate and strenuous intensity activities have been shown to produce great improvements to body image. Therefore, at the very minimum, the exercise should increase both heart rate and breathing rate, and individuals will probably build up a sweat.

## Time

Research has found a link between the duration of a workout and body image satisfaction.

Although these recommendations are made, so as not to overwhelm the exercisers (and cause them to 'burn out') it may be beneficial to start for 1–2 days a week at moderate intensity, and slowly increase the sessions. The women's confidence in their ability is likely to increase and their sessions can be extended accordingly. Above all, it is essential that they find the activities fun, which will draw the focus away from appearance and lead to the greatest likelihood of them wanting to take part and come back.

## Type

It appears that types of exercises which emphasise appearance may increase body image concerns. For instance, there is a high focus on burning calories in aerobics and this has been linked to body image dissatisfaction. Instead, 'mind over body' activities such as yoga have been shown to be particularly effective, as has weight training. It appears that these exercises encourage individuals to focus on functionality (what the body can do) rather than aesthetics (how the body looks).

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*"I just enjoyed it, so I kept going."*

**Leah, aged 16**

## Motivations

A large number of young women choose to exercise for appearance-related reasons (ie to lose weight or tone up). This is because they will have expectations of what is achievable with exercise from the media. However, exercise is a slow and challenging means of changing the body, and many women will ultimately face disappointment and frustration. Research has consistently found that women who exercise for appearance-related reasons are more likely to be dissatisfied with their bodies, have a higher risk of developing an eating disorder, and are more likely to drop out of their exercise regime.

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*"I feel like I have really big arms so that makes me conscious... That made me want to take part."*

**Melanie, aged 16**

Therefore, the importance of appearance should be de-emphasised. This may be achieved by:

- encouraging the exercisers to wear loose and comfortable clothing that is not too revealing; this will prevent women feeling conscious of their bodies while exercising and comparing their bodies to others
- reducing the presence of mirrors to avoid the women thinking about their physical appearance during exercise
- not discussing calorie expenditure of specific exercises.

The following motivations have been found to increase body image satisfaction:

## Enjoyment motivations

Evidence has constantly shown that if women enjoy exercise, they are more likely to continue exercising in the future. Sessions should therefore feature activities that women find fun and interesting. Factors that increase enjoyment are:

- allow the women to choose the type of exercise they would like to engage in.
- add lots of variety to workouts to maintain interest.
- play popular music to increase positive moods.

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*"We have so much fun, we don't even feel like we're exercising."*

**Louisa, aged 19**





Us Girls Rocks, North West

*“We do all kinds of stuff, that’s what makes it fun.”*

**Leah, aged 16**

**Social motivations**

Research has found that women who enjoy exercising with others and work as a group report greater body image improvements and are more likely to adhere to a long-term exercise regime. Sessions should create opportunities to encourage interaction and communication, possibly by:

- setting group goals (such as attending a specific number of sessions or fitness goals)
- establishing partnered/small-grouped activities
- encouraging the young women to support each other’s activities (such as cheering each other on).

*“I come here to socialise as well as play.”*

**Kerry, aged 16**

**Health and fitness motivations**

Studies have reported that individuals who are motivated by health or fitness are substantially more likely to experience greater improvements to body image satisfaction. Therefore it may be beneficial to:

- set realistic and achievable fitness goals (it may be preferable that these are kept private and are only known by the instructors to avoid the girls feeling embarrassed)
- encourage the young women to understand how beneficial exercise is to health and fitness
- provide specific examples of how the group have improved in fitness levels over time.

*“Now when I’m running for the bus, I’m not as out of breath as I used to be. Noticing little changes like that is nice and makes you feel good. It makes you want to keep going.”*

**Geeta, aged 16**



*"It helps to have something to work towards. Lots of different things to aim for."*

**Louisa, aged 19**

### Environment

The exercise environment is comprised of physical and social components that are important in shaping how young women feel about their bodies. Many studies have demonstrated that specific exercise environments can cause women to feel worse about their bodies.

Ultimately, if women feel worse about their bodies than they did before exercising, they are unlikely to exercise in the future.

Because of this, the following recommendations are made:

### Prevent comparisons

Research has shown that comparing one's body to others in the exercise environment is associated with a worsened body image. As a result, it should be emphasised that all bodies are naturally different in size, shape and weight. Emma Martinez-Lamkauski (project leader of Urban Fit in Easton) explains that as a result: 'We're all blessed in a different way. We try to celebrate differences'.

*"I'm always comparing myself to other people, and if I see someone that's got the body I want, I always feel kind of crap. Because it's like, oh why can't I look like that?"*

**Kerry, aged 16**

### Mirrors

The presence of mirrors has been shown to exacerbate body concern because they increase self-awareness of the body's size and shape. As a result, women are more likely to feel dissatisfied while exercising. This is particularly the case if they are exercising with other women, as the mirrors will cause them to compare their bodies to the bodies of other exercisers. Therefore mirrors should ideally only be present if they are functional to performing specific exercises.

### Media

Research has shown that women who see appearance-focused media (media that reinforces the 'perfect' body in society) can cause body image dissatisfaction while exercising. This can be from music videos, magazines or workout DVDs that feature attractive and thin women which can be damaging for body image satisfaction.

### Class orientation

The extent by which fitness leaders create a health or appearance-oriented atmosphere has shown to also play a role in body image dissatisfaction. This can include making comments that shape the class objectives or by wearing revealing or tight clothing. Alternatively, fitness leaders who wear loose clothing and make health-related comments can increase enjoyment and intention to exercise in the future.

*"I feel comfortable because everyone is completely different in body size here."*

**Louisa, aged 19**

## Conclusions

Encouraging individuals to initiate an exercise regime is greatly beneficial not only to their physical and mental health, but also to their body image. However, it is essential that sessions must be delivered in ways that shift the focus from appearance, which will enable greater body improvements and encourage young women to find more enduring reasons for exercise adherence. It is therefore important that programmes encourage young women to enjoy exercising with others and feel competent while being active.

### Further information

[www.usgirls.org.uk](http://www.usgirls.org.uk)

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