

Conformists at more risk of eating disorders: study

Young women who conform to the expectations of others and follow the crowd are more likely than non-conformists to have a negative image of their bodies and signs of eating disorders, a new psychological study suggests.

Being conformist appears to be a risk factor for such disorders and may provide a target for therapeutic efforts to treat them, says Dr Lenny R. Vartanian of the UNSW School of Psychology and Ms Meghan M. Hopkinson, a student in the Department of Psychology, Syracuse University, in a report published in the journal *Body Image*.

The researchers also found that young women who are well connected into social networks are less likely to be conformists and so less likely to develop a negative body image or bulimic symptoms. The study involved 300 American college students with an average age of about 19 and aimed to investigate links between social connectedness and conformity and how they relate to an individual's body image.

The participants were asked about their age, height and weight, then completed a series of questionnaires to assess their social connectedness, conformity, body image concerns, dietary restraint and bulimic symptoms. They were also tested for their "internalisation of social standards of attractiveness" - a way of assessing how much people "buy into" those standards.

"In a general sense, conformity can be seen as an attempt to gain security in a social network," the report says. "People are highly motivated to feel that they belong and having strong social connections is associated with better psychological health, whereas rejection and isolation are associated with poor psychological health.

"Once individuals have achieved the sought-after social security and feel a sense of connection to others, they should have less of a need to conform to external influences, and therefore be less likely to internalize societal standards of attractiveness, and less likely to develop body image problems and disordered eating behaviours."

"Perhaps harnessing a focus on an individual's own internal qualities (rather than on external sources of influence) might help reduce conformity and, consequently, reduce internalization, body dissatisfaction, and disordered eating," they suggest. "This focus on internal qualities, however, might be difficult for individuals who lack a clearly defined sense of self."

The researchers caution that the study represents only a snapshot of female college students, who are known to be a high-risk group for developing body dissatisfaction and disordered eating.

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