

8.12. Understanding adolescence

Introduction

All of you are now in a transition period between childhood and adulthood which is called adolescence. In this unit, we will try to understand the process of growing up and other aspects surrounding adolescence. Adolescence is characterised by several physical, social, physiological, cognitive and emotional changes. Since each one of us is unique, these changes may occur in different ways and at different points of time. This is an exciting phase where you want to take independent decisions, identify your rights, enjoy your freedom, explore and try new things, improve your social skills, form your value systems, develop attractions towards others and so on. However, this is also a vulnerable period where you are sometimes confused. Since this is a phase of experimentation, it is possible that your decisions may not be well informed and might have a negative impact on you or others. You are likely to experience a lot of peer, parental and societal pressure also. We will identify the potentials and capabilities in this stage that will allow you to make positive changes as well as discuss some of the challenges that you might face in dealing with them.

Let us read the following newspaper article and discuss what you feel about the ideas put forward in the article. After discussing the article let us answer the questions given below. Similarly, you can discuss the other articles that your teacher will share with you.

News articles for reference (The articles are shortened and not presented in their entirety.)

Glossary

Body image: is how one views one's body and the feelings associated with it. Body image, which affects our self-esteem is influenced by many factors such as cultural background, fashion and movie industry, advertisements of cosmetic and body altering products, parents' and others' attitudes, etc. Positive body image is when someone feels comfortable and good about themselves and their body, which leads to an increase in their self-worth. Negative body image is when someone has negative emotions or feelings associated with their body.

Anorexia: is a behavioural disorder arising due to distorted or negative body image and the intense fear of gaining weight. Anorexia is characterised by lack of interest in and denial of food. Patients with anorexia may try to lose weight by starving, fasting, excessive exercise, induced vomiting etc, even though they are often thin and underweight.

Bulimia: an eating disorder characterised by binge eating (eating excess amount in a short period of time) followed by some compensatory behaviour like self-induced vomiting, excessive exercise, fasting, eating at irregular intervals, etc. Often patients with bulimia are at average weight or above.

Osteoporosis: a medical condition in which the bones become brittle and fragile from loss of tissue, typically as a result of hormonal changes, or deficiency of calcium and vitamin D.

Article 1

Anorexia rising at an alarming rate

TNN | Jul 18, 2007

Rising obesity among children and adolescents might be the concern of many but cases of young girls falling prey to eating disorders are increasing at an equally alarming rate. Ten years ago, the cases of eating disorders — the most common of which is *anorexia* — were rare in India. However, psychiatrists claim that in the past few years, the figure has increased from anything between 5 and 10 times. What is more alarming is that increasingly girls of a younger age are falling prey to anorexia and bulimia.

“Television and the internet have come to rule our world and with both full of super slim models, young girls end up idolising them. There is immense emphasis on being thin by the society as well,” says Dr Rajesh Sagar, department of psychiatry, AIIMS. Psychiatrists claim that even when young girls— as young as ten— in the city suffering from anorexia are shown photos of slim and fit women, they shockingly dismiss them as overweight. “Anorexia is about poor body image. When you are constantly told that thin is beautiful, then your opinion about your own body is certain to change to fit the accepted standard,” says Dr Sanjay Chugh, founder chairman, International Institute of Mental Health.

An independent inquiry into the health of models in the UK recommended that girls below the age of 16 should be banned from walking the ramp. Talking about this kind of inquiry, psychiatrist Samir Parikh says: “These kind of measures are essential to project a more healthy body image of women. While eating disorders have disastrous consequences for women of all age groups, it can severely damage the health of an adolescent or pre-adolescent by retarding their growth.”

Anorexia and bulimia can lead to severe nutritional deficiencies in young girls especially if it sets in before puberty. Bones are the first to get affected and 50% of anorexic girls end up developing osteoporosis. When young girls are supposed to be packing their bones with calcium and protein rich food, they are actually losing bone mass. Besides, they are also more prone to heart failure and hormonal changes which can lead to absence of menstruation resulting in infertility later on.

Psychiatrists claim that girls as young as seven-eight years of age have been skipping meals to stay thin. “In very young girls it is hard to spot anorexia as refusal to eat food is seen as defiant behaviour. It’s not until the disease progresses that parents and doctors are able to diagnose it. I have young girls who don’t have any apparent weight problem asking to be put on a diet to lose weight,” says Dr. Honey Khanna, dietician, Max Healthcare. Lack of “sports culture” in India has made the problem more acute. “If schools and parents push children to play sports, it would go a long way in fighting both obesity and eating disorders,” adds Dr Sagar.

Questions

- What are the additional nutrient needs during adolescence? Discuss how we can incorporate this into daily diet.
- Discuss how comparisons, body weight-related bullying and criticisms develop a negative-body perception.
- How is this perceived body image influenced by society, for example, how do the marriage market and matrimonial ads contribute to this?
- Since adolescence is also a period of identity formation (which is linked to body image), discuss how we can help each other in developing a positive body image.
- Can body image affect one’s achievements and affect aspirations?

We read in the article about how weight concerns may affect body image in adolescents. There are other aspects that might also affect one's body image. Think of any advertisements that you have seen that may relate to body image (reducing weight or gaining height). Discuss such advertisements with your friends and answer the question given below:

- a) Discuss some of the messages that the advertisements try to convey.
- b) Do you agree with the messages? Why? Why not?
- c) Who sets the rules for the "perfect body"? How are these beneficial to those who set them?
- d) Discuss how these messages can affect the confidence of many people.
- e) Think of other products which also use stereotypical "body" as their marketing strategies, for example, breakfast cereals, gym products, etc.