

**WHAT DO  
YOU NEED  
TO**  
**#MAKEITGOOD?**

# Insight Topic 2: **BODY IMAGE**

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# **CONFIDENCE**

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## INTRODUCTION

NHS Tayside and partners want to adopt a positive approach to young people's sexual health. An insight gathering project has engaged young people in discussion of what they need to make relationships good. The purpose of the insight process is to bring detail to consideration of future services, particularly the possible use of social marketing or broader communication messages targeting young people.

This paper is one of a number of topic chapters published at [www.makeitgoodtayside.org](http://www.makeitgoodtayside.org) Each topic chapter presents:

- Insight from young people.
- Insight from other research, resources or services.
- A summary and discussion points.

For more about the insight gathering process please refer to '**About the Insight Gathering project**' also published at [www.makeitgoodtayside.org](http://www.makeitgoodtayside.org)

## 1. INSIGHT FROM YOUNG PEOPLE

This section of the report on young people's insight draws on discussion of two areas: **BODY IMAGE** and **CONFIDENCE**. In the initial focus group discussions, the topic of **BODY IMAGE** was raised and discussed by 6 of the 16 groups and the topic of **CONFIDENCE** by 2 groups. In terms of online engagement, responses to the online surveys (46 for the body image survey and 23 for the confidence survey) came from young people as follows:

Online engagement by Local Authority:

<b>Body Image</b>	Number of online submissions
Angus	10
Dundee	26
Perth and Kinross	10
Other area	-
Total by method	46

<b>Confidence</b>	Number of online submissions
Angus	1
Dundee	18
Perth and Kinross	2
Other area	2
Total by method	23

Online engagement by gender:

<b>Body image</b>	Male	Female	Other gender identity
Number of participants	18	27	1

<b>Confidence</b>	Male	Female	Other gender identity
Number of participants	8	15	-

Online engagement by age:

<b>Body image</b>	Under 16	16	17	18	19	20	21+
Number of participants	11	16	9	3	1	1	5

<b>Confidence</b>	Under 16	16	17	18	19	20	21+
Number of participants	6	9	5	2	1	-	-

In addition to discussion in focus groups young people were asked to respond to the request: *Tell us about your experience of body image when it comes to sex or relationships* and *Tell us about your experience of confidence when it comes to sex or relationships*. Insight from young people points to several themes.

### **Positive body image and confidence**

Confidence and a positive body image are understood to be positive attributes; described as follows by online contributors.

Feeling good for being you. (16/Dundee/Female)

Feeling happy about yourself, Feeling like you're with the right person. (16/Dundee/Female)

Feeling like you can be who you are. (>16/Dundee/Female)

Confidence was seen in different ways – broadly as about 'having a voice' but in terms of relationships as about feeling good with a partner, as an attribute when looking for sex, and as a state of being which is in itself protective when making decisions about sex. When asked *Tell us about your experience of confidence when it comes to sex or relationships* young people responded:

Being able to voice your opinion. (17/Dundee/Female)

How a person feels when they are not nervous about expressing themselves. (17/Dundee/Female)

Having the confidence to be free with your partner. (16/Dundee/Female)

Confidence is key on the path of getting laid. (16/Dundee/Male)

Not worrying about what people think. (16/Dundee/Female)

Feel confident in your own body. (>16/Dundee/Female)

Confidence comes with self-confidence and not putting yourself under too much pressure to do something you don't feel comfortable with.  
(19/Dundee/Male)

### **Other expressions of confidence**

As with the earlier insight section on 'alcohol' young people also connected alcohol use with feelings of confidence and one contributor saw confidence expressed in sending nude photographs.

When you've had a drink you become a bit of a different person. You get more confidence. (Focus group 9/Dundee)

Sendin nudes like. (18/PK/Female)

### **Unattainable archetypes and media pressure**

Young people's views on body image highlighted that confidence is often lacking or undermined, young people cite cultural pressures and media representations of men and women as a problem. Other young people can also reinforce these unattainable archetypes. When asked *Tell us about your experience of body image when it comes to sex or relationships* young people responded:

Magazines destroy it. (21+/Angus/Female)

Some people don't like their body image which can make them feel not confident in themselves. (17/Dundee/Female)

When society influences people to feel uncomfortable about their own body and effects (who) they are. (17/Angus/Female)

All the guys are buff; the girls are pure models. All judged on their appearance and nothing lasts because they have nothing in common. We need to see all shapes and sizes... Girls get ill to make themselves look like that. (Focus group 13/Dundee; *discussing reality TV shows*)

Body image is another really big issue with males and females as there is so much pressure through social media etc. to look like a model type person.  
(20/PK/Male)

It's about body image – guys and girls – like the Calvin Klein adverts. It means girls expect something when you take your top off – 'is that it?' – and you pull your pants down – 'is that it?'. (Focus group 14/PK)

There's a look – you could almost build the ideal guy or girl. (Focus group 15/Angus)

There's pressure to look like how guys expect you to look, like even I feel sometimes that my body lets me down. Like if I look in the mirror and think 'fuck, why don't I look like so and so.' (Focus group 8/PK)

### **Impact on self and relationships**

For young women a lack of body confidence is often directly related to their size; this then translates into expectations and feelings about relationships.

Don't be fat. (16/Angus/Male)

I am big and I don't feel sexy. (21+/Dundee/Male)

I feel like I cannot be loved because I am plus sized. (16/PK/Female)

Young men have also shared how they experience pressure about body size/shape.

I'm not a blonde haired, blue eyes, 6 foot 1, ripped, low body fat man. It hurts. (16/Angus/Male)

I think for guys they feel they should be a certain way or do certain things, you know like be all self-tanned and muscly. It's really important to them, they think about it a lot. (Focus group 9/Dundee)

A poor body image and lack of confidence can play out in the experience and enjoyment of relationships for young men too.

In a relationship I feel like I have to keep my belly in as I look fatter than others. (16/PK/Male)

Nervous about how I look. (18/PK/Male)

While a positive sense of self and body confidence is seen as a precursor for positive relationship and choices.

It means you're comfortable in the relationship to have sex and you feel you're ready to start a new phase. (16/Dundee/Female)

For some young people this lack of confidence, perhaps about body size or shape, can have more serious effects on self-worth and may underpin choices young people make or the quality of their relationships. Again, responding to the prompt *Tell us about your experience of body image when it comes to sex or relationships* young people said:

You never seem to love yourself for who you are. (17/PK/Male)

Difficult. Upsetting. Stupid. (>16/Dundee/Female)

I have sometimes felt uncomfortable in my body. (>16/PK/Female)

If you do not feel comfortable with your body image, then finding a relationship may become difficult. However, when it comes to sex you often find those with

little confidence will abuse their body by sleeping around, or the complete opposite and have no intimate relations at all. (21+/Dundee/Female)

I'm really self-conscious about my body and the way I look and how other people see me. it makes it hard to believe anyone can find you attractive and it makes me difficult to love. I'm not skinny or pretty, I don't have boobs like most girls my age and I feel disgusting if that's how I feel within myself how can I possible expect someone to see me and think anything different. It affects my relationships and ability to have a sexual relationship because I'm ashamed of my body and don't want people to see it even though I was with my partner for a long time and really we both wanted to take our relationship to the next stage it was very difficult to try to allow them near my body and in the end we haven't had sex because I'm too insecure to let them close enough to me.  
(16/Angus/Female)

After looking at magazines and pictures of celebrities, it is very hard to feel confident about yourself when with your boyfriend. I have been with my boyfriend for 5 years and still breathe in when I'm naked around him. I don't sit down without a t-shirt on either in case he thinks I'm "fat" when I sit down. We have been on holiday numerous times together and even then I covered up as much as I could. I go to the gym, I eat healthy and I have a great support network around me of which is my friends who feel the same as me although we are all off the same size and basically the same weight and shape. There isn't enough support for girls at High School or college to feel "normal" and to be shown from boys at school or college that a girl with curves is attractive. More needs to be done about this! (21+/Dundee/Female)

For some young people poor body image is linked to more serious mental health problems and young people can struggle to find support.

I have been depressed for a while, cut and all that shit and I have over eaten ALOT I went from being 10/11 stone to 14 within a year. I am thinking about the future when I meet someone (possibly Prince Charming) but I don't want to be this big when I meet him, I don't know what to do I think I have tried about everything and I just don't know what to do:( (>16/Dundee/Female)

I've always had an issue with my body image - I still do now. To me, I find it hard to live up to what is stereotypically thought of as a sexy body image - abs, big chest, v-line, biceps. After a lot of hard work in the gym, I have all those, but I'm still not happy with the way I look. I would identify as having body dysmorphia - I don't think I'll ever be happy with my physique. I find this incredibly difficult during sex - I'm constantly thinking of how I'm holding myself, my frame, to ensure I still look physically attractive. To me, what's on the outside is just as important as the inside, and so my vanity isn't just vanity, it's something I need to have to feel happy. (21+/Angus/Male)

## **Young men and their role in enforcing female archetypes**

While one contributor recognised the importance of a partner building and supporting feelings of confidence, "More confidence when in love, someone to make you feel good about yourself: 16/Dundee/Female", others cited the behaviour of young men toward young women; where a girl would be ignored because she does not look right, or where there is abusive language and behaviour that uses body size or shape to shame or humiliate. The worry that this might happen effects and controls young women's perceptions and confidence and so their behaviour.

Most people will tend to avoid those who do not suite their standard of body image, for example, an athletic male will tend to go for a tall slim female however he will avoid speaking to a female who is plus size. (18/Angus/Male)

I have always been very insecure about my body and it kind of went away when I had my first boyfriend but after we broke up he called me fat to all his friends and I'm more insecure than ever now. (16/PK/Female)

This is a thing that bothers me. I don't want boys to see me with my top off because I am scared they don't like how I look and they tell their friends that I am fat. I always keep my top on. (>16/Dundee/Female)

Some young people recognise such views of the 'perfect body' need to change.

It should not be about body image because for a relationship it should be more about personality than body. (16/Angus/Male)

There's a difference between the image and what you really want. I don't want some skinny girl. (Focus group 14/PK)

I don't like certain parts of my body, but my boyfriend says it is "fine", "perfect" etc, and my boyfriend doesn't like certain parts of his body, although I tell him it is "fine"... Although we tell each other constantly, why is it so hard to believe? It's frustrating! (18/PK/Female)

## **2. INSIGHT FROM RESEARCH, RESOURCES OR SERVICES**

The purpose of identifying insight from other sources is to help locate young people's perceptions and lived experience in a broader context, and where possible to provide further evidence to support the stress which young people have given to an issue, in this section regarding confidence and body image and their role in relationships.

This is not an exhaustive review of literature, the bulk of project resource has been put to engagement with young people, but an identification of what seems particularly important in consideration of the sexual health and wellbeing of young people and gives insight on other work that should form part of local partners'



consideration of service development and particularly the use of social marketing in relation to sexual health.

## **BODY IMAGE**

Much of the research, evidence or other sources of information about body image focus on obesity and eating disorders but there is also evidence in terms of sexual health and behaviours.

The **Body Confidence toolkit: Taking Action on Body Image**<sup>i</sup> has been developed by Beat, while they are an eating disorder charity the material has relevance to working positively with young people on body image and confidence generally. It defines body image in the following way:

“Body image is the way we think and feel about the size, shape, weight and overall appearance of our bodies. It has two components: *Evaluation*: whether we like our physical appearance and feel positively about it. *Investment*: how important our appearance is for our sense of self-esteem and value as a person”.

The importance given to a positive body image is as follows:

“Promoting positive body image in young people is important because poor body image is a barrier to them being happy and healthy and fulfilling their ambitions in life”.

**The British Social Attitudes Survey**<sup>ii</sup> asks questions about Body Confidence. Findings from the 2014 identify that 37% of adult women and 26% of men are **dissatisfied with their appearance**; for women this remains an issue across life stages. Further, nearly half of adults think that how you look affects what you can achieve in life and around one-in-three that “your value as a person depends on how you look”.

In recent years a new term **body shaming**<sup>iii</sup> has emerged, meaning shaming someone for their body type, a behaviour described earlier by young people participating in the insight gathering process.

In recent years the UK Government has had an interest in supporting research and responses to the issue of negative body image and young people. In 2012 the YMCA produced a report '**Reflections on Body Image**<sup>iv</sup>' for the **All Party Parliamentary Group on Body Image** and as part of this stream of work Nina Borrowes<sup>v</sup> conducted an assessment of the literature about body image for the UK Government.

This review identified from the evidence base about body image that body weight, the role of the media and individual psychological factors are all important; with regard to the latter the evidence is that poor body image is linked with low self-esteem, tendencies to compare oneself to others and experiences of bullying/abuse from others. The evidence also supports the view that both males and females experience low body satisfaction (as our insight from young people has shown), but females tend to have lower body satisfaction compared to males. In terms of outcomes for girls while deprivation may be a significant factor in some health

areas, evidence suggests that girls from middle to upper socio-economic status groups are likely to have lowest body satisfaction. In terms of the review, and of interest to this insight gathering process, the conclusion is that:

“Negative body image is linked to eating disorder symptoms, unhealthy weight control behaviours, and risky sexual practices.”

When it comes to prevention the review of evidence points to the need to change the types of images portrayed in the media and build young people’s resilience and resistance of feelings of inadequacy or low self-esteem by building social relationships with peers and family.

**Body confidence week**<sup>vi</sup> recognises the pressure on girls and women to look a certain way, encourages people to think their value is based on how they look, that these issues for women start in childhood and remain a pressure throughout life. It is part of the **Be Real Campaign** that describes its purpose as “to change attitudes to body image and help all of us put health above appearance and be confident in our bodies”. Help, resources (using social marketing approaches) and opportunities to get involved are available via the campaign site.

## **CONFIDENCE**

Scottish Government education policy identifies that we want young people to be *confident individuals*; this is one of the four core capacities articulated in *Curriculum for Excellence*. **Hands on Scotland**<sup>vii</sup> is an online resource that seeks to give practical information, tools and activities to help professionals respond to troubling behaviour and to help children and young people to flourish. It describes confidence in young people as follows:

“Confidence helps us deal with the challenges in life. If we are confident, we believe in our abilities and feel hopeful that we can achieve our goals. We are also more willing to try new things, and this helps us to learn. Having confidence also means we are more likely to feel comfortable with ourselves and that we have something worthwhile to give”.

The **Centre for Confidence and Wellbeing**<sup>viii</sup> investigates and publishes material that relate to young people and adults. A resource section explores the different factors which impact on confidence and wellbeing. The Centre writes about confidence and its relationship to self-esteem, self-efficacy and optimism as follows:

“Confidence is a word which we frequently use in everyday language yet rarely do we stop and think what it means. Most dictionary definitions of confidence focus on two related ideas: confidence is about being certain of your own abilities/confidence is about having trust in people, plans or the future. Confidence is thus not simply a feeling that things will go well but also a judgement on our own, or others’, abilities. When the abilities in question are our own, having confidence suggests a high level of self-assurance. Since confidence involves the belief that things will turn out well, confidence may sometimes be used interchangeably with optimism. As confidence is a multi-

dimensional concept it is not a term much used by psychologists... Instead of confidence, psychologists are more likely to use terms which may still be difficult to define but which are more focused and so more amenable to measurement. The most commonly used terms by psychologists are: self-esteem, self-efficacy and optimism.”

And then in terms of a useful short definition: “At the Centre we use the following formula for confidence: **Confidence = self-efficacy (the belief you can reach your goals) + optimism**”.

The opposite of a self-confident young person might then be one who has low-self esteem. The agency **MIND**<sup>ix</sup> state that: “Low self-esteem is not a recognised mental health problem, but self-esteem and mental health are closely related”. Low self-esteem or lacking in confidence in one’s ability can mean not feeling worthy, feeling unable to control one’s life, frustration and possibly depression.

Young people’s mental health is a concern for many agencies, nationally and those working with young people in NHS Tayside. The **Mental Health Foundation**<sup>x</sup> report: “Mental health problems affect about one in ten children and young people. They include depression, anxiety and conduct disorder, and are often a direct response to what is happening in their lives”.

Agencies mentioned above, and others including **Young Minds**<sup>xi</sup> and **The Site**<sup>xii</sup>, all provide useful information and support resources for young people and professionals.

**The complexity of the relationship between self-confidence/self-esteem, mental health problems and sexual behaviour** has been explored in the work of Douglas Kirby<sup>xiii</sup> in the United States, exploring risk and protective factors in young people’s sexual and reproductive health. He identifies that the picture is not quite clear, suggesting that confidence/self-esteem is a protective quality in some aspects but not all:

“Although high self-esteem and positive self-concept are commonly believed to be protective factors for sexual risk-taking, the picture is actually quite mixed. A few studies, including some with large samples that are representative of teens across the United States, have found that self-esteem and positive self-concept are protective factors against initiation of sex, use of contraception, and pregnancy. However, the large majority of studies has found that self-esteem and self-concept are not significantly related to sexual behavior. A few studies have found self-esteem to be protective only for girls or only for middle school (as opposed to high school) students. At least one study actually found that having sex can increase self-esteem. Thus, the relationships between these factors and sexual behavior are unclear and probably quite complex”.

Although this part of the report is ostensibly about confidence and body image it is clear from young people’s insight that this has highlighted the broader issues of mental health problems that young people may experience. Again, drawing on the

work of Douglas Kirby there is evidence from the US that **with regard to sexual and reproductive rights, mental health matters.**

“Teens who suffer from depression, thoughts of suicide, or fear of untimely death are more likely to have sex. Such emotional distress may affect their motivation to avoid pregnancy or STDs, diminish their ability to assess risk, or lead them to want to escape through sexual involvement. Alternatively, emotional distress may result from a negative environment, and that environment may actually cause the sexual risk-taking”.

These issues are explored further in the insight chapter ‘Stress + Mental Wellbeing’ also published at [www.makeitgoodtayside.org](http://www.makeitgoodtayside.org)

### **3. BODY IMAGE + CONFIDENCE: SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION POINTS**

When it comes to the insight offered by young people and other sources several important themes and issues have been highlighted. These are summarised below and discussion points are highlighted.

#### **Body confidence from an early age**

The insight from young people and from other sources would suggest that a significant minority of people are dissatisfied with their bodies, and that this starts young and remains an issue throughout life. Many agencies make efforts to promote positive self-perceptions and body confidence and it would seem that social marketing approaches might be well placed to undertake such work, particularly before or at early adolescence.

#### **Media literacy**

It is not within the scope of partner agencies to change the way that women and men are represented in the media. In terms of the social marketing benchmark criteria around *competition* the topic of male and female stereotypes/archetypes may feel an overwhelming challenge. However, it is possible to help young people become more perceptive and challenging as to what they consume. Social marketing processes should involve young people, and the process of developing media literacy can involve them in developing their own social media messages for peers.

#### **Other young people’s behaviour: body shaming**

In their personal lives and in much of the media young people hear others criticise, embarrass or humiliate another person for how they look. To avoid such attacks, we have heard young people say they never fully relax with a partner for fear that some ‘inadequacy’ about their body might be exposed. The end of a relationship is a particularly vulnerable moment for some young women. In terms of social marketing it would appear that there are specific behaviours that might be tackled, of course these are underpinned by complex matters of power and gender, but nonetheless this language and behaviour of body shaming is of real interest to the target group.

## Learning self-efficacy and optimism

The Centre for Confidence and Wellbeing say that confidence is about self-efficacy and optimism. These traits can be learned and built from positive childhood and adolescent experiences. Meanwhile, in terms of this insight gathering process and possible social marketing responses, young people might benefit greatly from explicit attention being paid to these personal positive attributes.

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