Building Positive Body Image through an Interactive Body Positivity Program:
A Positive Psychology Perspective

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We evaluated the outcomes of an interactive body positivity program designed to mitigate symptoms of negative body image and to support the development of positive body image among college women experiencing body dissatisfaction. To develop our program, we adopted a positive psychology approach and related research exploring positive body image (Tylka, 2012; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). Proponents of positive psychology argue that, within therapeutic interventions, it is essential to minimize negative characteristics of a mental health construct as well as to foster/teach positive characteristics of that construct. Positive psychology proponents also note that minimizing negative characteristics without nurturing positive characteristics will yield an intermediate mental health state, but not one characterized by well-being, or flourishing. Individuals who flourish appreciate themselves, engage in flexible thinking and proactive coping, and feel positive about their social relationships.

We piloted our program with nine college women who self-identified as experiencing body image struggles (confirmed via administration of a body satisfaction scale). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 22 (mean = 18.6) and in body mass index from 21.8 to 46.1 (mean = 27.5). Six participants self-identified as "White," two self-identified as "Hispanic," and one self-identified as "Black." Participants met every other week across eight weeks, with each session lasting 2 hours. Session objectives were (a) to understand positive body image and to appreciate an inclusive conceptualization of beauty, (b) to develop media literacy skills, (c) to develop self-compassion and skills to proactively cope with/filter negative body image information, and (d) to create messages of body acceptance and love. Core features of a positive psychology perspective on body image integrated into the program included body appreciation, body acceptance and love, a broad conceptualization of beauty, skills to filter information in a manner that protects body image, and (valuing) inner positivity (Tylka, 2012; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015).

The specific purpose of this study was to explore college women's perceptions about how participation in our program supported (or did not support) changes in their ways of thinking and seeing relative to the body image and their sense of self. In-depth interviews were conducted before and after their participation in our program. Data were transcribed and were analyzed using elements of the constructionist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2000).

Analyses of post-program interview data revealed that participants uniformly appreciated the opportunity to be a part of our program. All participants perceived that they had evidenced

movement toward a more positive body image. However, most participants noted that their newfound feelings of body positivity coincided with continued body struggles. To some degree, though, participation in our program served a protective function against these continued feelings of body negativity by strengthening participants' body images and by providing participants' access to a "toolkit" of skills to combat body negativity when it did arise. Thus, although participation in our program did not wholly ameliorate participants' body image concerns, as we discuss, participants frequently articulated post-program experiences reflective of the positive psychology conceptualization of *flourishing* and of the core features of *positive body image*.

  Newfound Appreciation and Care for the Self/Body. Almost all participants shared that, since participating in our program, they had made efforts *to accept and love their bodies* and *to demonstrate self-compassion* towards themselves in times when they were experiencing moments of bodily concern. An enhanced sense of appreciation for and acceptance of the body also prompted several participants to *adopt a deepened commitment to caring for the body*.

  Flexible Thinking. Participants articulated a flexible and multifaceted understanding of appearance and beauty, both in terms of cultural beauty ideals and in terms of how they viewed themselves and others. Several participants shared a *relativistic understanding of beauty* that acknowledged how shared cultural meanings regarding which appearances are beautiful are socially constructed, varying across time and place. Taking part in our program also moved many participants to expand their own understanding of the concept of beauty to include more than their physical appearances – including their "presence" and their guiding beliefs/values – which we characterized as participants' *Multidimensional Selves*.

  Engaged Coping. After taking part in our program, participants described adopting *engaged coping strategies* to proactively manage and minimize the psychological effects of body image concerns. For instance, participants *invoked newly honed media literacy skills*. Selected participants also shared how they had adopted coping strategies such as "reframing" (i.e., shifting their lens of interpretation to view interpersonal interactions in a "new light") to *mitigate the impact of negative (real and imagined) body-related feedback from others in their lives.*

  Social Support. Participants articulated how their involvement in our program prompted varied experiences in which they were either *the recipients or the providers of social support*. The social support received and shared by participants was affective/emotional in nature and included expressions of concern, care, reassurance, sympathy, empathy, and love. Participants' recognition of varied and readily accessible sources of support and acceptance is significant, as in prior work, support from others has been found to promote positive body image (Tylka, 2012).

  This work represents a beginning effort to develop, pilot, and evaluate an intervention program grounded in positive psychology and related empirical research on the concept of positive body image. Although most participants acknowledged that engagement in our program did not wholly mend their body image concerns, all participants perceived that, through their involvement in our program, they had come to embrace a more positive body image. This perception of strengthened body image was born out within participants' post-program accounts, where they described experiences echoing features of *flourishing* and *positive body image* that parallel characterizations of these concepts in existing work.

References

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