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BODY-RELATED ANXIETY AND COPING STRATEGIES USED BY CANADIAN FEMALE ADOLESCENTS

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Concerns with body appearance and subsequent physique anxiety are related to many health outcomes, including disordered eating and excessive or avoidant exercise behaviors (Crocker, Sabiston, Forrester, Kowalski, Kowalski & McDonough, in press; Crawford & Eklund, 1994). There has been limited research investigating body-related anxiety during adolescence especially from sound theoretical frameworks grounded in stress/emotion. It has been proposed that adolescent females engage in approach or avoidance strategies that could compromise their psychological and physiological health (Hart et al., 1989; Lazarus, 1993). The purpose of this research was to gain an in-depth understanding of female adolescents' experiences with body-related anxiety and their adopted strategies to cope with the influences and consequences of this anxiety. Thirty-three females, aged 13 to 18, participated in a total of eight age-dependent focus groups. Group discussions were semi-structured in nature, and explored the prevalence, antecedents and consequences of body-related anxiety. The results identified several age-specific coping themes. The role of parents was more prevalent with younger adolescents whereas social trends and peers were more influential in later years. Across age groups, adolescent females reported experiencing anxiety about their bodies resulting from comparisons to others (e.g. celebrities), as well as perceived expectations of others (e.g. mothers and male peers). Females' use of coping strategies that require minimal effort appear to be most prominent during adolescence. Examples included: dietary and physical activity manipulations, smoking, and the altering of their clothing and appearance. Implications of this research are directed toward the health-compromising behaviors used to deal with body-related anxiety.

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