

females place greater emphasis, and meaning, on their physical appearance and characteristics than males, and this leads to greater psychosocial dissatisfaction with their appearance. Using the Reasons for Exercise Inventory (REI) Smith et al (1998) found that females exercise primarily for weight and appearance concerns. This comes from the idea of perceived “beauty” and thinness, portrayed often in the media. Although while there is pressure on females to conform to the idealised image of thinness, it could be this very fact that acts as a major barrier and prevents females from engaging in regular exercise programmes.

social physique anxiety and the female exerciser

An area of body image that is inextricably linked with exercise and physical activity is the phenomenon of social physique anxiety. An individual, such as a female exerciser new to exercising, suffers from SPA when they feel intimidated by the presence of others in that environment. Their anxiety will lead to a change in behaviour such as training at certain times, or in certain places where there is little opportunity for physique evaluation, or more dramatic behaviours like crash dieting or – if they are unable to cope with the anxiety – stopping their training. With the increased importance that exercise and physical activity now plays in modern society, research examining SPA has focused on its relationship with exercise behaviour. This aspect of personality, related to social physique anxiety, has been consistently shown – within the context of exercise and physical activity – to be more prevalent in females than males.¹

Dispositional SPA refers to the levels of SPA that an individual is generally predisposed to experiencing. So, for example, an exerciser with high dispositional SPA will experience high levels of anxiety, even in environments that offer relatively little opportunity for appearance evaluation. Dispositional SPA will influence the individual’s responses and thoughts about being in an environment in which they experience this anxiety. It is the integration of dispositional and situational factors that produce the overall anxiety reaction.

Spink (1992) found that females with high levels of SPA were more likely to exercise in private, or away from others, to avoid any negative evaluation. The challenge for exercise professionals is to turn this challenge into an opportunity for our clients who might experience this, and to prevent it being a barrier to their continued exercising. Eklund and Crawford (1994) showed how female exercisers with high levels of SPA were more aware of the presence of male gym members, which heightened their social physique anxiety and increased their preference to exercise in female-only classes.

A further interesting factor that these researchers found was that high SPA females preferred exercising with other females only when their peers wore less tight fitting clothing, and found that exercising with females wearing tight fitting aerobic clothing also increased the opportunity for physique evaluation and therefore their experienced anxiety.

As an exercise professional working with female clients you can have a major influence on the situational component of SPA that your client experiences. Think about the gym environment where you typically work with your female clients: Does it promote



BODY IMAGE & THE FEMALE EXERCISER

the issue of body image plays an increasingly influential role in modern society. By fully understanding this common worry you will be able to understand your clients better and the results they want to achieve

“physique evaluation”? What can you do to reduce this? How can you alter the way you interact with your clients to reduce this? Have you thought about what you wear and the language you use, and its implications in relation to SPA?

Lantz and Hardy (1997) examined dispositional SPA and exercise behaviour in females and found that individuals with higher levels of SPA were significantly less likely to participate in exercise in environments where there was opportunity for evaluation about their body, because they perceived that any evaluation would be negative. This group also avoided situations where their body could be evaluated by others and became distressed when this could not be avoided, even though they were denying themselves the opportunity to participate in beneficial aerobic exercise.

self-presentational efficacy

Linked with SPA is the concept of self-presentational efficacy (SPE). SPE is the confidence that an individual has about their ability to make a favourable impression to others. SPE, within an exercise context, might also be related to factors other than physical attributes, including appearing fit and healthy, or coordinated. The association between high social physique anxiety and low self-presentation efficacy has again been shown to be a major barrier to exercise participation with female exercisers.

Ginis et al (2003) stated that the use of mirrors in fitness facilities and revealing clothing can reduce self-presentational efficacy because they increase the opportunity for negative self-evaluation, reinforcement of their negative body image, and increased social physique anxiety.

This is a good opportunity to reflect on the design of your facility and how it might be interpreted by this profile of client. Are there small changes that you could make to your practice that would allow exercisers who experience this to have a more positive experience?

exercise and body image

Research consistently demonstrates that participation in exercise increase female perceptions of body image. Body composition scores have been shown to be an accurate predictor in changes in body image after an exercise intervention, though this predictor is quite modest, and only accounts for about 10% of the change in body image. Therefore Sonstroem and Morgan (1989) stated that it is the subjective perception of change (how they feel), rather than any objective measure (change in body fat score) that has the largest mediating effect on female body image.

Usually sport and exercise participation has a positive effect on body image on young females, though participation in aesthetic-based activities, which have a preoccupation with body size and shape, lead to an increased possibility of negative body image and patterns of disorganised eating (Levine and Smolak 2002). Additional research has shown that female adolescents who participate in activities that do not emphasise body shape and size experience increased body image perceptions.

weight and body image

Negative body image in females is most often related to body weight and specific body areas (waist, hips, thighs), and this relationship is more prevalent in females who are overweight. Though interestingly, research has shown that the expected increase in negative body image with increased obesity has not been found.²

It has been shown that weight loss does increase an individual's perception of their body image, though there is little correlation between the actual amounts of weight lost and changes in body image. This implies that there is a threshold effect where small amounts of weight loss increase body image, then after that the impact seems to plateau. This has important practical implications for you to be aware of when working with clients who have set weight loss goals. The effects of regaining lost weight in females has also been studied and has been shown that small amounts (2-3kgs) of regained weight is sufficient to produce significant negative changes in the individual's body image.

As the literature reviewed shows, the issue of body image can have a dramatic influence on the cognitions, behaviours and emotions of some particularly vulnerable individuals within the fitness industry. If as fitness professionals we want to encourage mass participation in exercise we need to consider these issues in our professional practice to ensure that our clients benefit from positive exercise experiences.

The challenge is for you as the exercise professional to help your female client to overcome these issues. Strategies must be put in place immediately because this is the time when they will be most vulnerable to quitting. If you can reduce their social physique anxiety and increase their self-presentational efficacy then you can help them cope with the initial difficult stage and give them the opportunity to train at your facility for longer, and to enjoy the experience. **fr**

references

1. Eklund RC, Kelley B and Wilson P (1997), The Social Physique Anxiety Scale: Men, women, and the effects of modifying Item 2, *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 19, 188-196.
2. Adami GF, Meneghelli A, Ravera G, Bressani A and Scopinaro N (1999), Body image in obese patients before and after stable weight reduction following bariatric surgery, *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 46(3), 275-281.

resources

- Smith BL, Handley P, and Eldredge DA (1998), Sex differences in exercise motivation and body image satisfaction among college students, *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 86, 723-732.
- Hart EA, Leary MR and Rejeski WJ (1989), The measurement of social physique anxiety, *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 11, 94-104.
- Spink KS (1992), Relation of anxiety about social physique to location of participation in physical activity, *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 93, 1075-1078.
- Eklund RC and Crawford S (1994), Active women, social physique anxiety, and exercise, *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 16, 431-448.
- Lantz CD, Hardy CJ and Ainsworth BE (1997), Social physique anxiety and perceived exercise behaviour, *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 20, 83-93.
- Ginis KA, Jung M and Gauvin L (2003), To see or not to see: The effects of exercising in mirrored environments on feeling states and self-efficacy, *Health Psychology*, 22, 354-361.
- Sonstroem RJ and Morgan WP (1989), Exercise and self-esteem: Rationale and model, *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise*, 21, 329-337.

Paul Russell CPsychol is one of only a few individuals in Great Britain who is both a chartered psychologist (British Psychological Society), and an accredited Sport and Exercise Scientist (Psychology: British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences). He has provided sport psychology support to the England Boxing Team at the 2002 Commonwealth Games, Team England athletes at the 2006 Commonwealth Games, and for three Premiership football teams. As an academic he has published over 30 papers on sport and exercise psychology issues, and had been invited to present at many national and international conferences. He is also the director and owner of Fifth Space Consultants who provide psychology-related CPD courses for personal trainers and the fitness industry. www.thefifthspace.com