

# BODY IMAGE AND FEMALE ATHLETES

## What is body image? How is it unique to athletes?

Body image is how someone views their own body and physical appearance. This perspective can affect someone cognitively, emotionally and behaviorally. (1)

Young female athletes' body image can be influenced by society, especially social media. Societal influences including peers, parents, coaches, and social media may push an "ideal body type" for female athletes, across all kinds of sports. (1)

There is a strong association between these societal expectations and eating disturbances, body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem. Athletes have stricter expectations of their body, and influences from society can pressure athletes to conform to a specific body type standard, regardless of the impact on their sport performance. (1)

## Many factors can impact an athlete's body image.



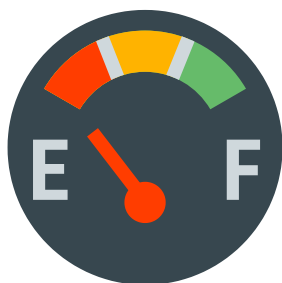
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## LOW Energy Availability

Low energy availability (LEA) occurs when an athlete burns more calories than they consume leading to an energy deficit.

### Risks of LEA:

- Hormonal dysfunction
- Irregular periods
- Increased injury (stress fractures)
- Weakened immune system



**Athletes with body dissatisfaction are at increased risk of LEA and subsequent poor health outcomes.**

## What Is body dissatisfaction?

Body dissatisfaction is when someone feels that their personal body image does not align with what they perceive as an "ideal" body. Body dissatisfaction can lead athletes to believe that there is something wrong with the appearance of their body. (1)

Because of this body dissatisfaction, female athletes are at increased risk for disordered eating which may lead to intentional restriction of food or excessive exercise in an effort to change their body appearance. Collegiate athletes show a higher level of body dissatisfaction associated with low energy availability, which means it can be related to relative energy deficiency in sport (REDs). (1)

There is a relationship between positive body image and sports confidence. Studies have shown that general confidence among athletes is associated with greater levels of body esteem, self-esteem and self-respect (3).

## So.. what is positive body image? And how can we promote it in sport?

Positive body image is defined as the love, respect and acceptance toward one's own body. This includes appreciating one's body despite how it compares to societal expectations and admiring what one's body is capable of. (3)

For female athletes, having an appreciation for their body and the function it serves to perform in sport may encourage greater certainty to succeed in sport and can impact sport confidence. (3)

How can someone build this self confidence in a world of social media and societal pressures? Female athletes struggling with body image can cultivate resilience that can help them better manage challenges that come their way. (2) Resilience is experiencing adversity and having a positive adaptation to adversity that is beneficial. (2)

This can lead to better sport performance and better management of the unique challenges that arise from sport. Factors that enhance resilience include stress coping ability and supportive athletic environments. (2) Interventions that build mental skills to cultivate psychological resilience are crucial to the female athlete.

**Female athletes may experience pressure to fulfill many unhealthy and unrealistic "body ideals". The "healthy ideal" prioritizes health over aesthetic and outward appearance.**

### ❌ Societal Body Ideal



- Models in magazines, social media influencers, celebs on television, etc.
- Promotes thinness, leanness (but not too muscular), clear skin, perfect teeth/hair, etc.
- **One-size-fits-all approach**

### ❌ Athlete Body Ideal



- How one "should look" for their sport (e.g. how a swimmer looks)
- Dependent upon sport (e.g. cross country = skinny, long legs, incredibly lean)
- **One-size-fits-all approach**

### ✅ Healthy Ideal



- **Body diversity** - no one societal or athlete "look"
- Behaviors that benefit health rather than aesthetic
- Recognizes balanced eating and exercise look different for each person

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## How can mental skills training help you develop better body image?

The goal of mental skills training is to improve athletic performance as well as to teach confidence, adaptability and resilience. Enhancing female athlete resilience leads to positive adaptation by building self-esteem and helps to cope with stress. (2)

Developing positive adaptations and self-esteem involves practicing acceptance and being non-judgmental about any negative thoughts – so when ready, the athlete can positively adapt to how they respond to these thoughts and beliefs. (2)

Mindfulness has been used to promote mental toughness, improve performance outcomes, and improve coping with stress in female athletes. Mindfulness practice increases the non-judgmental awareness of the present, allowing the person to take the time to decide what a thought or situation means to them and how they want to react. (2)

In addition to cultivating resilience and practicing mindfulness, it is important to also incorporate strong positive relationships between athletes and parents and coaches, as well as healthy teammate support.



## Types of Mental Skills Training

- Sport visualization
- Internal vs external motivations
- Release of “uncontrollable” factors in sport
- Focus on “what’s important now” - present vs forward thinking
- Mindfulness

## Citations

(1) Jagim AR, Fields J, Magee MK, Kerksick CM, Jones MT. Contributing Factors to Low Energy Availability in Female Athletes: A Narrative Review of Energy Availability, Training Demands, Nutrition Barriers, Body Image, and Disordered Eating. *Nutrients*. 2022;14(5):986. Published 2022 Feb 25. doi:10.3390/nu14050986

(2) McManama O'Brien KH, Rowan M, Willoughby K, Griffith K, Christino MA. Psychological Resilience in Young Female Athletes. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. 2021; 18(16):8668. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18168668>

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