

Novel Eating Disorder Prevention Intervention Implemented in Philadelphia Public Schools: Body Empowerment Project

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Abstract

Eating disorders are the most fatal mental illnesses for teenagers and young adults in the U.S., with a mortality rate 12 times greater than that of any other psychiatric illness. Body Empowerment Project has developed an innovative preventative health intervention that seeks to reduce eating disorder risk in adolescents. This program has been implemented broadly across 12 public middle and high schools within the School District of Philadelphia with promising early success. We encourage other schools to adopt this early intervention to improve mental health outcomes for youth.

Background

Eating disorders are the most fatal mental illnesses for teenagers and young adults in the U.S., with a mortality rate 12 times greater than that of any other psychiatric illness (1). Eating disorders also have 55-97% comorbidity rates with other psychiatric illnesses (2) and they increase suicide risk by up to 32 times (3). Common narratives and representations of people with eating disorders almost exclusively show white, affluent, thin women. However, Black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) are at an increased risk for developing eating disorders. For example, black teenagers are 50% more likely to exhibit bulimic behavior than their white counterparts (4). Even so, BIPOC people are significantly less likely to receive treatment than their white counterparts. Despite their high mortality rates, eating disorders are preventable illnesses. In a system where healthcare is oftentimes inaccessible for marginalized communities, prevention, and early screening can significantly turn around health outcomes for our vulnerable youth.

Solution

At Body Empowerment Project, we tackle eating disorder prevention through a 10-week middle and high school program. The program involves the delivery of a research-validated curriculum using a near-peer mentorship model between college students and middle/high school students in the School District of Philadelphia, one of the most underserved districts with a student population that is primarily BIPOC people.

Our program was developed in collaboration with pediatric eating disorder experts at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia to incorporate a clinical understanding of (1) how key risk

factors (such as poor body image) can lead to the development of an eating disorder, and (2) how protective factors (such as high self-esteem and coping skills) can reduce the risk of developing these and other comorbid mental illnesses. We, therefore, address eating disorder prevention from three key angles: building body image and self-esteem, teaching effective coping strategies, and fostering community among our participants. The intervention incorporates elements of trauma-informed care and cognitive-behavioral therapy, an empirically-supported treatment that is effective for eating disorders.

Our program has already significantly impacted 450+ students in Philadelphia. Data from our first year of programming (collected through our ongoing study in collaboration with the University of Pennsylvania and the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia) revealed that the program significantly decreased global eating disorder symptoms and significantly increased body appreciation in our participants. Additional findings from this study can be viewed on our website, and a publication of this research is currently in preparation.

Innovative Approach

Currently, eating disorders are nearly exclusively tackled through treatment. While 28.8 million Americans will develop an eating disorder in their lifetime (5), only 10%-20% of those people will receive treatment (6). Treatment is difficult to access. On top of that, when treatment is available, it is incredibly expensive and rarely covered by insurance. Lastly, even when someone is able to complete treatment, most of those treated relapse (7). Incidence of new cases is outpacing successful treatment. Fortunately, eating disorders are preventable illnesses. By building protective factors and minimizing risk factors, we work to prevent eating disorders before treatment is necessary.

Prevention is especially integral for the population we serve. We work with students in the School District of Philadelphia, one of the most underserved school districts in the country, made up of primarily low-income, black, indigenous, and people of color – people who have the least likely access to treatment. We are able to provide a novel behavioral health intervention to the members of the community who need it most.

Financing

Body Empowerment Project is a 501(c) (3) nonprofit organization that allows us to receive financial support from various private foundations and institutions, including the University of Pennsylvania, the Scattergood Foundation, the Philadelphia Foundation, Women's Way, and more. We also rely on the support from our generous supporters through yearly fundraising campaigns. The main expenses associated with this intervention include program supplies, volunteer travel, meals, and incentives for our low-income and food-insecure student population. We estimate that the 10-week program costs approximately \$1,000 to run at each school, but this number varies based on student enrollment, school location, and other factors. To support our initiative or sponsor a school, please visit our website.

Scaling

At Body Empowerment Project, our mission is two-fold: (1) to prevent eating disorders in underserved adolescents of marginalized identities and (2) to equip them with the skills to live peacefully and healthfully in their bodies through meaningful near-peer interactions. We achieve this through an evidence-based prevention program specifically geared toward underserved youth. With this in mind, we plan to scale our program to new school districts and, eventually, new cities across the country, as preventative health interventions are most successful when they are broadly implemented and easily accessible. Additionally, we encourage school districts to consider adopting our curriculum as a much-needed supplement to existing health education. Our ultimate goal is to fundamentally transform the way youth across the nation define their self-worth and shape discussions about health and wellness.

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