Promoting body positivity in the library

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Introduction

Being a teen can be particularly brutal for many reasons. Changing bodies and anxiety about how you look can hit teens particularly hard, and may potentially combine with anxiety, depression, and other mental illnesses to worsen their mental health. The body positivity movement is designed to promote loving your body and pushing back against messages that all bodies should look a particular way. Understanding how mental illness can affect the body and promoting body positivity within the teen areas of a library play a crucial role in promoting mental health awareness for young adults.

Eating disorders

Eating disorders are a widely-recognized form of mental illness that show tangible signs on the body. The Mayo Health Clinic defines eating disorders as "persistent eating behaviors that negatively impact your health, your emotions and your ability to function in important areas of life" (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2016, para. 1). Common eating disorders found among teens include anorexia, bulimia, and binge eating (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2015). While eating disorders are most commonly associated with girls and young women, boys and young men are not immune. Factors that can cause or exacerbate eating disorders include society pressure to conform to a specific body type, participation in certain athletic activities, or anxiety - these can affect all teens regardless of gender (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2015). For people of colour, particularly teens, their weight and food intake are some of the few aspects about their appearances they feel like they can control in a racist society (Garbes, 2017). Eating disorders, like other forms of mental illness, are not instantly cured once a diagnosis has been given. Recovery can be a long, hard road, and difficult to achieve alone.

For teens who may have eating disorders or other mental illnesses related to body image, there are ways librarians can provide resources. In a blog post on Teen Librarian Toolkit, author J.J. Johnson discussed her experiences with bulimarexia as a teen, recounting the time she spent in the section of the library covering eating disorders (Johnson, 2015). Towards the end of her post, she highlights steps she believes teen librarians can take to help patrons who may have an eating disorder. These include placing helplines and other resources in areas teens might see, such as the computers or areas in the stacks where books about eating disorders are shelved (Johnson, 2015). She suggests that librarians focus on emphasizing body positivity and not just eating disorders when creating displays (Johnson, 2015). And, perhaps most importantly, she urges librarians to point readers to books that focus on recovery from eating disorders (Johnson, 2015). These suggestions, in addition to knowing the local eating disorder recovery resources, can be immensely helpful to your patrons.

Creating a body positive space

Independent of eating disorders, promoting body positivity in general can lead to better mental health in teens. In an information sheet published by the British Columbia group, Here to Help, it notes that individuals with high self-esteem and body image can create a feedback loop that promotes mental health (Here to Help, 2015). Conversely, negative self-esteem and body image can lead to worsening mental health, including displaying symptoms of anxiety and depression (Lifespan, 2006). In a study published by researchers at Brown University, they found that teens with body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) exhibited anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation at higher rates than teens without BDD (Lifespan, 2006). They also noted that even for teens who do not display signs of eating disorders, the mental energy devoted to worrying about their body image is significant and draining (Lifespan, 2006).

There are several ways teens librarians can promote body positivity and work to improve the mental health of the teens they serve. A key example is to highlight that different body types are equally valuable. A common failing in young adult novels is the lack of body diversity. As well, in many instances when non-thin characters are included, they are coded as villains or have their weight be an obstacle that needs to be conquered to live fulfilling lives (Jensen, 2015). The ability to see oneself in literature is vitally important, especially for teens who may be struggling with negative body image. Book Riot writer Kelly Jensen, in an article discussing fat phobia in YA, wrote, "But you should damn well let them see themselves in ways where their bodies aren't commodified, aren't a source of daily hell, or render them as worthless beings who have no future unless they can 'overcome' their state of fat" (Jensen, 2015, para. 32).

Highlighting books with fat or big protagonists can go a long way in ensuring teens feel positive about their bodies and represented in the media they consume. Books like "Dumplin'" by Julie Murphy, "Gabi, a girl in pieces" by Isabel Quintero, or the comic book series "Faith" are all recent publications that centre fat characters in positive, non-judgmental ways. The Tumblr blog "Size acceptance in YA", co-run by Jensen and three librarians, is a good resource for teen librarians unsure of where to start locating materials for their collections. Finding other forms of media that include positive portrayals of characters with non-traditional body types is an relatively easy way librarians can promote body positivity and self-esteem.

Conclusion

Promoting body positivity within teen spaces can be immensely valuable for them. Giving teens an area where they feel they will not be judged for their bodies or providing them with the resources they need are positive steps librarians can take to help promote the mental health of their patrons.

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