

# Losing the 3Ds: Dieting, Drive for Thinness and Body Dissatisfaction

The '3Ds' are dieting, drive for thinness and body dissatisfaction—unhealthy actions and ideals that are often communicated to us and internalized from a young age. Once internalized, we may inadvertently perpetuate the cycle by passing those same ideals onto others—including children, students, patients and communities. This harmful cycle can be stopped before disordered thinking turns into disordered eating; shedding the 3Ds and encouraging a happy and healthy relationship with your body are vital tools in eating disorders prevention.

NEDA's recommendations on how to curb disordered thinking—and how to avoid passing those messages to others—were developed by Michael Levine, PhD, Paula Levine, PhD and Linda Smolak, PhD. Please note that these tips are intended to adjust mindsets in order to prevent the spread of unhealthy attitudes and beliefs. If you or someone you know is struggling with an eating disorder, please seek [individualized professional guidance](#).

## Changing Your Thinking

- Examine your own attitudes, beliefs, prejudices and behaviors about food, weight, body image, physical appearance, health and exercise. Identify any unhealthy attitudes derived from dieting, drive for thinness and body dissatisfaction. Try to change these attitudes in your everyday life—for example, if you edit photos of yourself before posting them on social media, consider why you do so, how you feel when you do it, and what message you're communicating to yourself and others. Honestly examining your thoughts and feelings is the first step to replacing unhealthy attitudes with healthy ones.
- Mindful eating and healthy physical activity are part of a well-rounded lifestyle. Assess your eating and exercise habits; strive for balance and moderation over extreme measures.

- Encourage balanced eating of a variety of foods in moderation. Don't treat food as a reward or punishment; such behaviors set food up as a potential weapon for control. Discourage the idea that a particular diet or body size will lead to happiness and fulfillment. Encourage eating in response to body hunger. Allow all foods in your home.
- Don't constantly criticize your own shape (e.g., "I'm so fat—I've got to lose weight."). This type of self-criticism implies that appearance is more important than character, and that there is always room to 'improve' one's appearance. Promote and celebrate body positivity.

### **Modeling Healthy Attitudes for Young People**

- Set a positive example of a healthy and balanced relationship with food. Don't talk about or behave as if you are constantly dieting; encourage eating a broad variety of foods in response to body hunger. Don't equate food with positive or negative behavior. The dieting parent who says she was "good" today because she didn't "eat much" teaches that eating is bad, and that avoiding food is good. Similarly, "don't eat that—it will make you fat" teaches that being fat makes one unlikable. Learn about and discuss with your sons and daughters the dangers of trying to alter their body shape through dieting. Trust your children's appetites; never try to limit their caloric intake—unless requested to do so by a physician for a medical problem.
- Help children accept and enjoy their bodies and encourage physical activity. Love, accept, acknowledge, appreciate and value your children—out loud—no matter what they weigh. Convey to children that weight and appearance are not the most critical aspects of their identity and self-worth. Do not communicate the message that you cannot dance, swim, wear shorts, or enjoy a summer picnic because you do not look a certain way or weigh a certain amount. Notice often and in a complimentary way how varied people are—how they come in all colors, shapes, and sizes. Show appreciation for diversity and a respect for nature. Link respect for diversity in weight and shape with respect for diversity in race, gender, ethnicity, intelligence, etc. Educate your children about the existence, the experience and the ugliness of

prejudice and oppression—whether it is directed against people of color or people who are overweight.

- Devote yourself to raising non-sex-stereotyped children by modeling and living gender equality. Develop a historical perspective on the politics of the control of women’s bodies. Work toward and speak out for women’s rights: to fair pay, to safety, to respect, and to control of their bodies. Demonstrate a respect for women as they age, in order to work against the cultural glorification of youth and a tightly controlled ideal body type. Take women seriously for what they say, feel and do, and focus less on the way they look. Give boys and girls the same opportunities and encouragement (in assignment of chores, choosing a sport, etc.) and avoid restricting children to gender-specific activities (boys can enjoy cooking and girls can fix cars). Remain close to and supportive of your sons and daughters as they experiment and struggle with body image, grooming and cosmetic issues, flirtatiousness and sexuality, etc. Talk to your sons and daughters about the way body shape and sexuality are manipulated by the media and the struggle their brothers, sisters, boyfriends or girlfriends have in trying to conform or not to conform.
- Build self-esteem. The most important gift adults can give children is self-esteem. When adults show children that they value and love them unconditionally, children can withstand the perils of childhood and adolescence with fewer scars and traumas. Self-esteem is a universal vaccine that can immunize a youngster from eating problems, body image distortion, exercise abuse, and many other problems. Providing self-esteem is the responsibility of both parents. Girls especially need support and validation from their fathers.
- Encourage children to talk openly and honestly and really listen to them. Encourage open communication and teach children how to communicate. Recognize that sociocultural pressures surrounding drugs, sexuality, body image and perfectionism require great character strength, self-assurance and decision-making in young children. Let them know that their opinions and feelings are valued. Encouraging young people to assert themselves helps them say no to pressures to conform. Feeling loved and confident allows them to accept that they are unique individuals.

- Encourage critical thinking. The only sure antidote to the tendency to conform to the powerful seduction of the media and peer pressure is the ability to think critically. Become a critical consumer of the media—pay attention to and openly challenge media messages. Talk with your children about the pressures they see, hear, and feel to diet and to “look good.” Parents have to encourage critical thinking early, and educators have to continue the mission. We need to teach kids how to think, not what to think, and to encourage them to disagree, challenge, brainstorm alternatives, etc. Girls especially need to learn that men are not the ultimate authorities and that they themselves have something important to contribute.
- Develop a value system based on internal values. Help children understand the importance of equating personal worth with care and concern for others, wisdom, loyalty, fairness, self-care and self-respect, personal fulfillment, curiosity, self-awareness, the capacity for relationships, connectedness and intimacy, individuality, confidence, assertiveness, a sense of humor, ambition, motivation, etc. Model this value system; examine, explore, and, if necessary, modify any appearance expectations you have about your child or the children you work with (e.g., ‘will she grow up to be pretty?’).
- Teach children about good relationships and how to deal with difficulties when they arise. Males and females alike may use food to express or numb themselves instead of dealing with difficult feelings or relationships. Because of messages that suggest that the perfect body will dissolve all relationship problems, young people often put energy into changing their bodies instead of their feelings or their relationships.
- Be aware of some of the warning signs of eating disorders. Understand that these warning signs can appear before puberty. Watch for: refusing typical family meals, skipping meals, comments about self and others like “I’m too fat; she’s too fat,” clothes shopping that becomes stressful, withdrawal from friends, irritability and depression, or any signs of extreme dieting, bingeing or purging.

- Educate your community about the risks of the 3Ds and the dangers of eating disorders. At the same time, be careful not to promote or teach young people how to become eating disordered. Please see [Sharing Your Story Responsibly](#) for guidance on responsible eating disorders education.

