

The Power of Others:

Recommendations to help create environments in which *every body* can be healthier and happier

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Other people can have profound and lifelong influences on an individual's feelings about his or her body and physical abilities. In turn, an individual's feelings about his or her body and physical abilities become important dimensions of that person's identity and can influence his or her lifestyle and health. These and other insights are among the findings from the qualitative research component of Wellness IN the Rockies (WIN the Rockies)². From this research a set of recommendations has emerged regarding behaviors that people can adopt to protect and support other individuals – family, friends, and community members, as well as total strangers – in their journey to develop healthier lifestyles related to physical activity, food and eating, and body image. Lifestyles based on healthy attitudes and behaviors related to physical activity, food and eating, and body image offer many benefits, including improved psychological well being and reduced risk for problems such as heart disease, high blood pressure, and osteoporosis. These lifestyles also can help people achieve a healthy weight³.



Below (in bold-face type) are recommendations for various audiences. Under each recommendation is one or two quotations (in italics) from WIN the Rockies' interviewees that illustrate the need for that recommendation.

Target audience – *People of all ages:*

- **Appreciate that teasing, criticism, or negative actions related to a person's body and/or physical abilities can be deeply hurtful, and the resulting negative view of one's body and/or physical abilities can last many years – even a lifetime.**



There were all these short jokes. . . . I always felt it would be nice to be bigger, just from the standpoint of not being picked on or having to be afraid . . . of getting [beaten up]. . . . [I]t would have been nice to be big enough to . . . if you had to, clean house . . . and not have to worry about it. Live in peace. 'Cause I would be sick to my stomach to go to school. . . .

- Male in his 30s

[One of my junior high teachers] was used to working with athletes, and when [he didn't] have . . . athletes to work with, this gentleman had no patience, and that definitely formed my opinions of myself. . . . Some people are athletic and . . . some of us aren't. I didn't get those [athletic] genes.

- Female, early 40s

- **Remember that some individuals cannot develop healthy lifestyle habits until they feel positive about their body and/or their physical abilities.**

I never liked working out in gyms or anything like that. I'm not a very big guy. I've never liked being around all these other, you know, giants. . . . [I]t's just a little awkward to go strolling into some kind of gym where you've got all these [well]-built guys. [But I've been in a situation working out with women and]. . . I would probably go to a gym now. I'm in better shape.

- Male in his 30s

Target audience – Parents/caregivers and other adults interacting with youths:

- **Create an environment that nurtures young people's sense of self-worth and respect for the body sizes and shapes of other youths and adults.**

My daughter was teased an awful lot about her weight because she was big. When you sit there and hold your little girl and she's crying because people have said things, and you know what you went through in school . . . ugh! . . . I [tried] to let [her] know that I loved her no matter what, that her body size [wasn't] the only thing in the world, but . . . when you're going to school and



kids are teasing you, it is the only thing in the world.

- Female, 50-ish

[My very slender daughter is] totally not built the same way I am . . . and she eats regular meals. And she is called "anorexic," to her face [and] to others. Very, very painful for her. . . . [I]t's the same for her being called skinny as for fat people who take to heart being called fat.

- Female, 40-ish

- **Praise young people in ways that help them value their body regardless of size or shape. This praise can help protect, shield, or buffer them against negative influences later in life.**

My mother and father instilled in me that no matter what we wore was fine. . . [that it didn't matter what you looked like, it was what was inside]. . . . Then I had an alcoholic husband

who told me he couldn't handle it when I was pregnant and gained weight because then I was fat. . . . [B]oth [my parents and my husband] influenced me . . . but I think that growing up, [my parents] had the more positive effect . . . [and] that offset the negative that I had been hearing from my husband. . . . [F]or the most part, I am happy with me. - Female, early 40s

My mother never made me feel like I was big. She never did. Oh dear . . . I was a big girl, but I never knew it. . . . I always thought I was okay because of [my mother]. - Female, late 70s

- **Teach critical thinking skills to children and adolescents so they can effectively evaluate and not internalize hurtful comments that other people may make about their bodies and/or physical abilities.**

[The teasing was] just the typical fatty-fatty-two-by-four things, you know, poetry and stuff like that. . . . I personally just thought, "Boy, that was really mean," but . . . it just didn't really catch on. - Female, 40-ish

- **Be a positive role model.**

I . . . want my daughter to be friends with everybody. . . . I'd like to set the example. . . . I wouldn't want her to be the one on the playground pointing the finger. . . . [K]ids have all different body sizes. - Female, mid-/late 20s

My goal now is to help my kids develop a healthy lifestyle. . . . [T]here's a lot of good and bad choices that we make as humans. And certainly food and physical activity tie into two of them. And perception of others' [bodies] or your own body. If you perceive yourself as having a bad body type, that can be hard on your self-image. So I think that's something that I will pass on to my kids to make sure that they're confident. . . . - Male in his 30s

- **Foster and support physical activities that include all youths and that help them enjoy physical activity.**

In high school . . . if you weren't an athlete . . . as far as [the athletes and good-looking girls] were

concerned, you were a scuzzbag. I . . . tried out for teams and I would make the team, but never ever had the opportunity to play and still put forth all the effort to be part of the team but never got the reward of some playing time. . . . The ones that did get to play treated the ones that never did play differently. And I think that had a little bit of negative aspect on me, too.

- Male, mid-50s

I went from not being able to swim . . . at all to being a real good swimmer. . . . I think the fact that I had a coach that was very positive and had the patience to teach me to swim had a big impact on me . . . and probably gave me a lot of self-confidence to go forward with other sports. . . . " - Female, 40-ish

Target audience – Spouses:

- **Demonstrate respect for your spouse in terms of his or her body size or shape.**

At the present time, I look at myself in the mirror in a bathing suit, . . . and I think, "Oh, if I could just hold this in. . . . If I could just get down a little bit more, I would be more happy." . . . but I don't let it stop me from going swimming. . . . [A]nd my husband enjoys my company so much, and . . . he compliments me, and that goes a long way. I've got a good guy. I tell him all the time, "You make me feel young and beautiful." And he does.

- Female, mid-60s

From a public health perspective, individuals need to feel competent to adopt and maintain a healthy lifestyle, and they also need to feel worthy of living it. Other people can encourage those feelings in individuals around them by contributing constructively to the accumulated experiences of those other individuals. Individuals whose self-esteem is based on a sense of self-worth and competence in relation to body image and physical abilities are more likely to have the capacity and motivation to respect and care for themselves by adopting, enjoying, and maintaining healthy lifestyle habits.

¹The authors gratefully acknowledge the invaluable contributions of other team members. Betty Holmes co-led the qualitative research component. Linda Melcher, Martha Raidl, Mary Kay Wardlaw, Barbara Wheeler, Frank Blakely, and Marc Schure helped conduct interviews and focus groups and/or interpret the narratives. Julie Harker, Shelley Hill, and Kim Puls assisted and supported the narrative team. David Buchanan and Sandra Shepherd provided consultation and training. Sylvia Moore served as WIN the Rockies project director and co-principal investigator. The human-subjects review committees at University of Wyoming, Montana State University, and University of Idaho approved the project.

²As part of WIN the Rockies, narratives or life stories related to physical activity, food and eating, and body image were gathered from 103 adults – 57 women and 46 men – in three of the project’s communities: Powell, Wyoming; Lewistown, Montana; and Preston, Idaho. These individuals ranged from 17 to 87 years of age. The narratives were gathered by tape recording individual interviews and focus group discussions. Key quotations were identified and grouped into 146 thematic codes. Analyses have been carried out based on quotations, codes, and emergent themes. The interviewer or focus group moderators estimated the age of each interviewee if the individual did not mention it during the course of the interview or focus group.

For a published compilation of the key quotations from all the life stories, see *Let Their Voices Be Heard: Quotations from life stories related to physical activity, food and eating, and body image* by Betty Holmes, Suzanne Pelican, and Fred Vanden Heede, Discovery Association Publishing House (in press). For more information about WIN the Rockies, go to www.uwyo.edu/wintherockies. The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Initiative for Future Agriculture and Food Systems (IFAFS) Competitive Grants Program, award #0004499, funded WIN the Rockies.

³As defined by Joanne Ikeda of the University of California at Berkeley’s Center for Weight and Health, “a healthy weight is the weight you achieve when you have a healthy lifestyle.” Accordingly, body weight is one important measure of health, but there are other important measures, too. These include blood pressure, levels of fats in the blood (for example, triglycerides and high-density lipoprotein [HDL] and low-density lipoprotein [LDL] cholesterol), fruit and vegetable intakes, frequency and duration of physical activity, etc. Additional publications in the *Focus on Health, Not Weight* series provide information on other aspects of healthy lifestyles related to physical activity, food and eating, and body image.

A downloadable version of this publication is available at www.uwyo.edu/CES/PUBS/MP112-2.pdf

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Issued in furtherance of cooperative extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Glen Whipple, Director, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming 82071.

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