Psychology at La Trobe University

Body Image Disorders Research

Professor Susan Paxton:

My name’s Susan Paxton and I’m Professor at the School of Psychological Science at La Trobe University.

The specific areas that I’m interested in is understanding what factors contribute to the development of body image problems and eating disorders and then to try and develop interventions that can help, either prevent or treat those problems.

For our research, the first thing we really need to know are the risk factors that lead to the development of the problems that are of interest to us, especially the social and environmental factors, because they’re ones that can potentially be changed.

What we have found is that quite young children, three to five year olds, already have absorbed some of the attitudes that our community holds about body size and shape. So for example, thin body sizes are associated with positive characteristics and larger body sizes are associated with more negative characteristics. So for example, when we assess this using stories we find that mean children are described as larger, fatter children, so those attitudes are established early.

During teenage years we know that media and peers are especially important, those kinds of influences, and those factors do continue to be important at later ages but our research has also shown that in mid-life, there are a whole range of other factors that become important and they mostly relate to factors that relate to ageing and often gaining more weight and not having time to look after yourself.

Once you’ve identified the environmental and attitudinal factors that you want to change then you can develop strategies to help people develop new ways of thinking or to manage their environment more effectively.

We’ve put together a number of activities that participants in interventions can do. One that we are particularly happy with is an intervention for Grade Seven girls. So we help girls to understand about the peer and media influences that might be affecting them and we’ve found quite positive results. We’ve also developed an intervention for women in mid-life and in this intervention we really try to help women address the problems that are specifically relevant to that stage of life. So that’s been quite effective too.

Parents are often asking us if there’s anything they can do to help provide an environment where their children grow up with a positive body image, so what we’re doing now is putting together some information and resources and skills to help them provide a positive environment for their children.

We believe it’s really important to translate our findings into practice, and so we have been involved in working with a number of community organisations such as the Butterfly Foundation, which is an advocacy foundation for eating disorders but also we have been very much involved in a number of government committees so that we can ensure that the government is aware of interventions that they could be applying in practical settings.

Body image and eating disorders affect an enormous number of people and do cause very great psychological pain, not just to the individuals involved but often also to their families and to the community generally. So if we can develop effective prevention interventions and also early interventions, we can really help improve the mental health of our community.