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## Technology, Social Media & Eating Disorders



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## Virtually You: 5 Steps to Get REAL! about Digital ED Risks

BY Bobbie Eisenstock, Ph.D., California

Facebook. Twitter. Tumblr. Instagram. Pinterest. What do social media have to do with eating disorders? A lot.



Our media culture today is more body image-driven than ever. It is virtually impossible to escape the onslaught of picture-perfect bodies that populate TV shows and commercials, splash the pages of magazines, and inhabit the online world where digital denizens can be seen flaunting themselves on social media.

For many years now, research has demonstrated a connection between what we call traditional media—magazines, television and advertising—and body dissatisfaction, reduced self-esteem, a drive for thinness and disordered eating. Recent studies indicate that new media—where you hang out in the digital media culture or what you unintentionally stumble upon—can affect body image, food and weight concerns, especially if you struggle with these issues. Navigating the interactive digital media culture can be a potentially more hazardous minefield of ED risks than using traditional media because it empowers us as both media consumers and creators who can post and share, copy and paste, and upload and download content 24/7.

We have a media body image problem and there is no simple solution. We cannot screen out all of the potentially harmful messages, but we can reduce risk factors by taking control of media's influence on our lives. The key is media literacy. Media literacy skills help to meaningfully question and challenge images and messages that may be detrimental to developing

positive body image and self-esteem while reinforcing those that promote health and well-being.

To help counteract the digital media culture's potential influence on normalizing unrealistic body standards, NEDA partnered with my students from California State University, Northridge to create *NEDA's Get REAL! Digital Media Literacy Toolkit*. After studying the research on media and eating disorders and honing their digital and media literacy skills, the students applied what they learned to their personal experiences with social media and body image, and in some cases disordered eating, to create the toolkit activities.

The *Get REAL! Toolkit* is for everyone who goes online with a digital device—computer, smartphone, tablet or game console. Share the toolkit with parent and youth groups, middle and high schools, colleges and universities, physicians and mental health professionals to help them think critically about media's impact on body image and our social, psychological, emotional and physical health and well-being. Here's what you need to know and what you can do to effectively use the toolkit for yourself.

### What You Need to Know to Get REAL! about Digital Media and Body Image

While media do not cause eating disorders, media are one of the potential factors that can affect body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem, which subsequently lead to eating disorders. How much of a role media play depends on what and how much media an individual uses, his or her knowledge, skills, personal relationships and experiences, and predisposition to the complex interplay of contributing ED

factors. The shifting media landscape has opened a new interactive milieu where an ED's insidious nature is particularly worrisome because many of the images and messages are posted and shared by individuals who glorify the thin ideal, compare appearances, promote body shaming, and affirm eating disorders as a lifestyle choice.

**Digital Footprints.** Unlike our use of traditional media, in the digital media culture we leave a trail behind that creates a digital footprint of our lives: a virtual extension of our thoughts, feelings and social behaviors. Everything we share and others share about us online—intentionally or unwittingly—is part of our virtual identity: content we create, all of our “likes,” who we “friend,” videos we watch, music we listen to, magazines and blogs we read, games we play, hobbies and interests we enjoy, celebrities we follow, apps we use, key words we search, websites we visit, communities we join, products we browse, buy and review, and photos and selfies we tag, tweet, post and pin. With every screen touch or mouse click, our digital footprint grows larger and reveals more about who we are. There is a lot that can be virtually known about a person's body image and proclivity to determinants of eating disorders.

**Ana-Mia Networks.** While social networking can improve practitioners' ability to educate, prevent and treat eating disorders, it can also circumvent and hinder their efforts. Since the first pro-ana (anorexia) and pro-mia (bulimia) websites surfaced on the Internet, there have been attempts to flag and ban the content. With the increasing popularity of social media, a cyber-underground of

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► **Virtually You: 5 Steps to Get REAL!** *continued*

social networks that facilitate and sanction anorexia behaviors has grown and actions to censor ED-related hashtags, posts and photos have intensified. Several social networks implement guidelines prohibiting posting content that “actively promotes or glorifies self-harm,” including anorexia, bulimia and other eating disorders, and direct users to websites where they can find positive support.

Just how effective are these bans?

Evidence is emerging that censoring potentially harmful content can have a boomerang effect: instead of eliminating risk-inducing content, censorship has led to a continuous renewal of anorexia sites and stronger connections within the surviving blogs that create a virtually impenetrable support system for sufferers. The result is that it is more difficult for practitioners and public health campaigns to reach bloggers with relevant health-promoting information, making it more important to focus on early intervention.

**What You Can Do: 5 Steps to Get REAL!**

Here are five practical steps to use NEDA’s *Get REAL! Digital and Media Literacy Toolkit* to jumpstart your media literacy skills in the digital culture.

**1. Walk the walk and talk the talk.**

Familiarize yourself with social media and pro-ana and pro-mia messaging. With the majority of children and teens constantly connected to their digital devices, the odds are that the ones who are at-risk or already struggling with an eating disorder are fluent in “thinspiration” hashtags and blogs. If you are going to help them counteract these messages, you need to know what they are and how to interpret them. Think critically about who constructed the message and why, techniques used to create it, underlying meanings and points of view, and different ways the message may be interpreted by someone wrestling with body image issues or suffering or in recovery from an eating disorder.

**2. Start early to help kids make wise choices on the digital playground.**

Get into the habit of going online together and ask kids to show you what they do, where they go, and who they know. Talk about what you see, hear and read, listen to the words they use

to describe appearance, size and shape, and help them interpret media messages. This keeps the communication lines open, improves their media literacy skills, gives you an idea of their digital footprint, and provides an early warning sign for certain ED symptoms. You probably already know the advice about establishing media guidelines, and the rule about keeping computers, smartphones, tablets, TV and video games out of kids’ bedrooms to better monitor their media time and choices. This is especially important for children overly concerned about their appearance and during adolescence when body image anxiety is amplified.

**3. Take advantage of teachable moments.**

Kids are starting to worry about their weight and body image as early as kindergarten. Help boost their self-esteem and dispel unrealistic body expectations by taking advantage of unplanned circumstances that lend themselves to talking about healthy eating, positive body image, and self-acceptance. Teachable moments are opportunities to practice media literacy skills. And, if the time is right, teachable moments can be more effective than asking a direct question that puts a tween or teen on the spot about a sensitive issue, making it more difficult to discuss.

*Teachable Tips:* Point out where ultra-thin models in ads have been digitally retouched to slim hips and waist, create a thigh gap and enhance their cleavage, while explaining that people don’t look like that in real life, and even if they did, they would be unhealthy. Talk about how posting critical comments about a friend’s selfie might make him or her feel about body image. Start a dialogue about how to help a classmate who posts body shaming videos of herself, inviting strangers to comment if she is fat or ugly, and what kids their age can do to enhance their self-image. Use language appropriate to children’s ages and stages of development to help them understand that someone may need to find the right support to deal with pressures that could lead to making unhealthy lifestyle choices.

**4. Support social action to counteract digitally-altered body images.**

There is a growing movement to create transparency of digitally-generated

illusions of body perfection that normalize unrealistic body expectations. Some celebrities, who are the face of popular culture and standardize cultural body ideals, are speaking out against retouched picture-perfect images that reshape their appearance, even posting unfiltered selfies to show how they naturally look. Several advertisers and retailers are voluntarily adopting “no retouching” policies to be more socially responsible. The Eating Disorders Coalition introduced a bipartisan-sponsored Truth in Advertising Act of 2014 (HR 4341) requiring the Federal Trade Commission to study the health consequences of digitally-altered human images in advertising.

*Social Action Tips:* Advocate for a new “normal” that celebrates healthy body shapes and sizes with social media shout-outs: like, text, tweet, pin and post – and urge others to do the same – about celebrities who expose retouching, advertisers who practice transparency, and campaigns that demand consumer protection from deceptive body image advertising. Call out companies that feature unrealistically-altered body images in their product advertising and let them know you will use your consumer power by not buying from them.

**5. Think critically about body image every time you use media.**

Empower yourself with a media literacy lens on the digital world to help mediate its potential influence on eating disorders. Use NEDA’s *Get REAL! Digital Media Literacy Toolkit* as a guide to deconstruct and reflect on body image messages, map digital body image footprints, and take a stand to support actions that shift the spotlight from limited and artificial body stereotypes to more diverse and authentic body ideals. ■

**References:**

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► **Virtually You: 5 Steps to Get REAL!** *continued*

*Bobbie Eisenstock, Ph.D. writes, teaches, and consults about the social-psychological effects of the emergent digital media culture on children, teens, and families. A national expert on media literacy, she facilitates workshops to help parents, educators, health practitioners,*

*and youth advocates understand the risks and realities of social media and implement strategies to manage digital footprints. Dr. Eisenstock is on the faculty at California State University, Northridge where she serves as a Fellow at the Institute for Community Health*

*and Wellbeing and directs the Get REAL! Project that created NEDA's Get REAL! Digital Media Literacy Toolkit. In 2013, NEDA honored her with The Westin Family Award for Excellence in Activism and Advocacy. Contact her at [www.BobbieEisenstock.com](http://www.BobbieEisenstock.com)*

### Get REAL! Toolkit Guide

The toolkit activities will help guide you each step of the way. Check out the toolkit, and get involved, at:

<http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/get-involved/media-watchdog>.

Step 1: Find out what your own digital footprint says about your body image by mapping *Your Digital Footprint* and taking the *Digital Body Image Quiz*.

Step 2: Test your media literacy knowledge by taking the *Media Literacy Quiz* (answers are included) and start asking the right questions using *Media and Your Body Image*.

Step 3: Develop your skills to deconstruct body messages with *Media Literacy Key Questions* and *Worksheet* and encourage positive body image with the *Body Positive Pledge*.

Step 4: Advocate for transparency and celebrate our natural looks, body sizes and shapes using tips for *Celebrity Shoutouts* and *Letter Writing Guidelines*.

Step 5: For more information, check out the *Digital and Media Literacy Resources*.



**Get REAL!**

**DIGITAL MEDIA LITERACY TOOLKIT**

Community Engagement Partnership to educate, engage and empower us about media and body image in the digital media culture

California State University  
**Northridge**

**NEDA**  
Feeding hope.  
National Eating Disorders Association

## Need personalized guidance for yourself, or in support of a loved one affected by an eating disorder?

### *The NEDA Navigators are here to support you!*

**N**EDA Navigators\* are individuals who have experience, either personally or in support of a loved one, navigating the overwhelming systems and emotions involved with seeking treatment for an eating disorder. Volunteers, trained by NEDA staff and program Clinical Advisors, are available to help you find treatment referrals, local support groups and resources tailored to your needs; be a listening ear during your or your loved ones' journey; provide encouragement through a difficult time; and share their own story responsibly to offer hope for recovery.

The range of experiences among the Navigators is diverse, and when you request to be connected with a Navigator, we try to match you with someone who has been through a similar set of challenges and who can share their experiences in a helpful, responsible way. You can request to speak with someone who has dealt with co-occurring conditions such as depression,

substance abuse or self-harm; who shares similar aspects of your identity such as ethnicity, gender, religion or sexual orientation; or who has the same relationship to the person struggling, such as a fellow mother, father, partner, spouse, sibling, or friend.

To request a Navigator, visit us at <http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/neda-navigators> and we'll get you connected. For more information about the NEDA Navigators, visit the Navigators homepage at [www.myneda.org](http://www.myneda.org). ■

\* Navigators are not mental health professionals or treatment providers. They are PFN volunteers who have been through an eating disorder themselves or with a loved one and are now in strong recovery. Navigators are trained to help you identify resources, treatment options, and be a source of support during your journey.

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## Join the NEDA Forums!

Connect with fellow siblings, parents, partners/spouses, friends and others pursuing recovery. Whether you are personally affected by an eating disorder or supporting someone who is, the NEDA forums are designed to be a safe and welcoming space to discuss issues related to eating disorders, disordered eating and body image. Check out the community guidelines and join the conversation at [www.myneda.org/forum](http://www.myneda.org/forum).

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***Making Connections** offers a place for our members to share their personal experiences and insights to support others. While we value these contributions, please note that the views, beliefs and perspectives expressed do not necessarily represent those of the organization.*

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### Share Your Thoughts

If you have an idea for an article, a question you'd like us to research, or would simply like to share your story — we'd love to have you participate! Email us at [pffnetwork@myneda.org](mailto:pffnetwork@myneda.org). Be sure to include your full name, email address, and daytime phone numbers so we can contact you.

***Making Connections* is by parents, family and friends for parents, family and friends!**



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