

# BE REAL

BODY CONFIDENCE FOR EVERYONE



## Somebody Like Me

### Executive Summary

A report investigating the impact of body image anxiety on young people in the UK.

January 2017

In partnership with

# YMCA

*Dove*  
self-esteem  
project





# Executive summary

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Young people are facing increasing pressures relating to their appearance. While a focus on the importance of appearance in society is by no means a new phenomenon, many young people today are struggling to escape the constant barrage of messages they receive about how they should look and how they should behave.

Through powerful outlets such as print, television, film and digital media, young people are repeatedly presented with images of the 'ideal' body. The pressures to conform to these 'ideals' are reinforced by their peers and through social media in the ever-connected world in which they now live.

Given the wide range of contributing factors and the differing ways young people can experience issues with body confidence and body image, making positive changes in this area requires a range of approaches.

As part of this research, young people were given the space to discuss and share their experiences. Their views and ideas were then used to create practical solutions that both they and others can take forward to help tackle body image anxiety in the UK.

## **Young people had a broad understanding of body image**

Critically, young people's understandings of body image extended well beyond the narrow concerns of size and shape that are traditionally presented. Instead, for the majority of young people, an importance was placed on the wider image they present to the world.

## **The majority of young people often worried about the way they look**

- ▶ Four in five young people (79%) said how they look is important to them.
- ▶ Nearly two-thirds of young people (63%) said what others think about the way they look is important to them.
- ▶ More than half of young people (52%) said they often worry about the way they look.

## **The pressures young people faced came primarily from celebrity and media culture, but were reinforced by their peer group**

Bombarding young people with images of the 'perfect' body is putting them under undue pressure to match it. Indeed, celebrity culture and the media were commonly cited by young people as the main sources of pressure they experience.

However, the influence of peer groups cannot be underestimated. While often they did not specifically create the appearance 'ideals', for the majority of young people, it was the peer group that underpinned and reinforced these 'ideals' and expectations.

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### **The biggest impact of body image anxiety was young people withdrawing and isolating themselves**

The internalisation of these pressures and the resulting concerns about appearance can lead to young people taking measures to change the way they look.

- ▶ More than a third of young people (36%) agreed they would do whatever it took to look good.
- ▶ Almost three in five young people (57%) have, or would consider, going on a diet to change the way they look.
- ▶ One in 10 young people (10%) said they would consider plastic surgery to change the way they look.

However, speaking to young people reveals that the majority are not taking extreme measures to change their appearance. Instead, the inability to escape these pressures is resulting in a sense of hopelessness and leading to young people withdrawing and isolating themselves.

### **Many young people were not seeking support for their body image anxieties**

Young people reported relatively low levels of support-seeking behaviour, something that is likely indicative of the isolation and sense of hopelessness that many with body image anxiety feel.

- ▶ Parents were named as the group young people were most likely (43%) to seek support from.
- ▶ After parents, friends were the group that young people (32%) were most likely to go to for support on body confidence.

### **Teaching young people about body confidence makes them feel more positive about themselves**

- ▶ Three quarters of young people (76%) who learnt about body confidence in school said it made them feel more positive about themselves.

### **Interventions targeted at young people must be rooted in their experiences and opinions**

To help tackle the growing body image anxiety experienced by young people, this research proposes that action be taken to:

- ▶ **Tackle the body image 'ideals' presented to young people.**
- ▶ **Reduce the value placed on appearance in society.**
- ▶ **Encourage schools to become settings that promote and foster body confidence among young people.**
- ▶ **Support parents and carers to help promote body confidence among young people.**
- ▶ **Equip young people with the means to tackle the causes of body image anxiety.**

The *Be Real Campaign* is a UK-wide campaign to change attitudes towards body image. This research was undertaken by YMCA on behalf of the *Be Real Campaign*. The quantitative fieldwork for this research was conducted by EdComs, a specialist education communications agency. The quantitative sample consisted of 2,018 young people aged between 11 and 16 years old from across the UK. In addition to this, 501 teachers from across the UK were also surveyed. To supplement this, YMCA also undertook qualitative research in the form of focus groups held in 12 different locations in the UK.

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