

The Female Runner's Body- A Resource to Promote Positive Body Image and Healthy Habits Among Young Female Runners

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Introduction

This is by no means a comprehensive guide to issues around female body image or eating disorders. The end of this PDF includes resources, such as the NEDA Coach & Athletic Trainer Toolkit that provides detailed information and should be reviewed prior to any facilitation of the Body Positive Workshop for Female Runners. If the facilitator is not a mental health professional or registered dietician, I *highly* suggest reviewing all of the resources listed as well as additional education on eating disorder diagnosis, signs and symptoms, and the impact of media and society on females' body image.

The provided workshop outline is a tool for those interested to promote positive body image and healthy habits for young female athletes in their communities. It was developed by a mental health counselor to include a structure that involved education to female athletes, discuss facts and myths around the female athlete's body, and promote connection among team members.

If you have any questions or suggestions please contact Ray Nypaver at wanderlustcounseling@gmail.com.

Template 1: Body Positive Workshop for Female Runners

- I. **Intro: Presenter, Why this topic is important, overview of the workshop**
- II. **Sharing circle: What messages (negative and positive) have we been told about our bodies? (General and as runners)**
- III. **Exposing the myth: What have we been told the runner's body is supposed to look like? (Ask for a volunteer in the audience to draw a picture as teammates give examples)**
- IV. **The young female athletes body**
- V. **Reality: Athletes who fuel properly are the ones who stay in the game. Not fueling leads to injury.**
- VI. **What does fueling look like?**
- VII. **Signs & Symptoms of EDs/Disordered Eating**
- VIII. **What are the best ways to talk to our teammates if we have concerns? As a team, how can we create a unified approach to positive body image? (Include "competing without comparison" Compete= To seek together)**
- IX. **Body meditation and mantras (hand out note cards and markers)**
- X. **End: Messages from adult runners.**

Template 2: Detailed Workshop Outline (Includes Ray's notes and inserts from other resources)

- I. **Intro: Presenter, Why this topic is important, overview of the workshop**
 - II. **Sharing circle: What messages (negative and positive) have we been told about our bodies? (General and as runners)**
 - III. **Exposing the myth: What have we been told the runner's body is supposed to look like?**
 - Write/draw mythical runner while getting feedback from the girls. See if a girl would like to volunteer to draw, otherwise you or the coach can. (Go slow and ask questions so the person drawing can keep up.)
 - Have an open discussion on the purpose of advertisements, social media, and societal factors that impact our definition of beauty.
 - Discuss the use of photoshop. How often do they think it is used in advertising? How often do they and their friends use it?
 - Attempt to re-write/draw the body of a real female runner (Yes, this is a bit of a trick as the goal is to have the girls realize that this is an impossible task.)
 - IV. **The body of young female athletes**
 - Puberty is a temporary and necessary phase of growing up. It could be useful to share information on the range of timescales for puberty, especially for coaches that don't have experience of this exciting time of change. Another opportunity to share that each of us is perfect and the way nature intended.
 - Physical changes may lead to a brief period of time where running progress slows down, stagnates, or recedes. Weight gain is normal, and should not be looked at negatively. Puberty in itself is not a permanent stage, though many physical changes are. As long as the athlete continues to fuel properly, she will still get stronger in the long term.
 - *It's up to the facilitator how much they want to go in to physical changes. However, most resources still neglect to frame these changes in the positive light they deserve, so if you do choose to delve in, make sure you have the proper tools.
 - V. **Reality: Athletes who fuel properly are the ones who stay in the game. Not fueling leads to injury.**
 - *Statistic: In a study of high school female athletes, 42% of athletes reported disorder eating and they were 8x more likely to have an injury compared to athletes who did not report disordered eating. (NEDA)
 - An athlete who does not fuel properly will miss their potential.
- Performance Factors:

- fatigue
- malnutrition
- dehydration
- electrolyte imbalance
- osteoporosis (hello stress fracture)
- muscle breakdown
- loss of endurance
- loss of speed
- muscle cramps
- overheating
- loss of period*
- depression

*It is important to note to young girls that periods are important indicators of health.

Missed periods are signals that something is off balance, such as our bodies not receiving the nutrients it needs, or unsustainable levels of stress.

App for tracking: <https://www.fitwoman.com>

VI. What does health & healthy fueling look like?

- No diets!
- BMI is a POOR indicator of health.
- Runners should strive to eat a colorful bounty of food from all the food groups in order to feel good and get in all the nutrients needed to fuel a runner's body, but eating some processed and sugary foods each day/weekly will not negatively impact our running performance (especially as runners are constantly burning calories). It's also important to highlight carbohydrates, especially whole grains, as an important piece of any endurance athlete's meal plan.
- Eating ENOUGH food to fuel and recover from workouts.
- No labeling foods as good or bad.
- Eating should be Individual & intuitive.

VII. Signs & Symptoms of EDs/Disordered Eating

- Eating only "clean" foods
- Going to the bathroom after meals
- Avoiding social situations, especially if they are centered around food
- Isolation/Decreased social interaction
- Moving food around on the plate
- increase of injuries
- Reports of feeling light-headed/dizzy
- Loss of period
- Over-training

*The DSM-V offers a more detailed, but still objective list of what specific eating disorders include. This presentation focuses on what coaches and teammates are most likely to observe, especially as weight is not always an indicator.

VIII. What are the best ways to talk to our teammates if we have concerns? As a team, how can we create a unified approach to positive body image?

- Call people “UP to recovery” (Taken from Lauren Fleshman & Dr. Melody Moore), podcast link below)
- Say what you notice in terms of behavior rather than physical appearance.
- Remind them that you care about them and want to support them.
- Refer to NEDA, coaches, athletic trainer, school counselor, etc.
- Create a healthy team atmosphere: Don’t use negative body language, among the team or against other teams. Change the norm!
- Competition without comparison: Question the girls on if/ how they compare themselves to other teams and other runners. How accurate are they? What is their definition of competition? How does it compare to its Latin root “to seek together”? The goal is to get the girls behind the concept that the team should always aim to build each other and even other competitors up. We get the best out of ourselves when we aim to get the best out of others.

IX. Body meditation and mantras (hand out note cards and markers)

Possible mantras:

- “Tall and strong.”
- “My thighs let me go for miles.”
- “Glutes for power.”
- “ Strong belly for nourishment, strong core that helps me go for more.”
- “Strong body, powerful stride.”

*See meditation below

X. End: Messages from adult runners.

- Don’t listen to what everyone around you says, go by what you think and how you feel because at the end of the day that is what matters the most.
- “If I could talk to my younger self, I’d tell her she’d be a lot happier going out to enjoy the miles with fuel in her body and would be able to run much farther. That it was more valuable to have a positive experience than to base that experience on whatever body image I was having that day.”
- I would tell myself to raise my head and use my legs to their full potential.
- My advice is to strive for healthy fuel for the machine that is YOU and to find the weight you perform best at, not some mythical number somebody points to on a scale!

- I'd tell ANY girl that training hard, staying hydrated, getting enough sleep, and setting goals are what count. Treat your brain right and your body will do amazing things. There is no such thing as an ideal runner's body.
- Stop worrying so much about being thin, eat right and exercise, that's all that matters to be healthy!

(Feel free to use comments from your own friends)

Positive Body Image for Runners Meditation

Start by finding a comfortable position. I think laying down is great for this one, but do what is comfortable for you.

Let's start by taking a few deep breaths. Truly deep breaths, really letting you wonderful belly expand.

Inhale for ~5 seconds, feeling your belly rise both up and sideways, letting your amazing runner's lungs work at their full capacity too. Then exhale for ~5 seconds, letting everything sink, your belly button move towards the spine, your body relaxing towards the Earth. Do this a few times on your own.

Next, we are going to do a body scan. As we go up the body, from feet to head, we're just going to take note of how each part feels and if we are holding any judgement of that part, good or bad. If there is any negative judgement, we're going to send that area a little more breathe and love.

Begin with your feet and ankles, the part of our body that connect with the ground each stride, amazingly absorbing impact several times our body weight. Stretch those gorgeous toes!

Next move to your lower leg, your calves, shins, up to the knee. Do you notice any areas of tension or areas of ease? If there are any areas of tension, breathe into those spots, sending a little extra light their way.

Moving above the knees, to your thighs. Again, notice any areas of tension or ease. Notice any thoughts about your thighs. If there's any area of tension or judgement, breathe deep, and as you exhale send your breath and some extra love to those powerful, beautiful thighs.

Continuing upward to your pelvis and glutes! Notice any sensations, thoughts, areas that might need a bit more love. Both these areas are responsible for so much in running. The pelvis carries the weight of our upper body, and sets in motion a smooth stride. And we know activated glutes keep injury away. Breathe deep and send light to that strong booty and pelvis.

Next, the core, stomach, back, chest. Breathe deep once again, letting that belly shine and expand fully. Then notice any areas of tension, areas that feel light, and any thoughts you may have on an area. Send your breath to any area that needs it, letting

the area relax as you exhale. And regardless if you feel any tension or not, send a little extra love to the belly, that house the organs that break down our foods and send vital nutrients to the rest of the body so we can perform our best. The core that keeps it all together, our running form intact.

Moving to the shoulders and arms. Wiggle your shoulders around if you need to. Notice any areas of tension, of ease, any thoughts. Breathe in and let your breath flow to the areas that need it. Recognize the importance of the arms in you running, how their efficient swing helps propel your legs.

Next, the neck and head. They may not carry a lot of weight, but they sure hold a lot. Breathe in. Notice areas of tension. Relax your mouth, nose, eyes, forehead. Breathe in, let your thoughts be at ease.

Before we move on, scan your whole body one more time. Notice how it feels. Same, different? If there are still areas holding onto some tension, breathe and send love to those areas a few more times. If there is lingering tension that you can't seem to relax, let that be okay. The main thing is to thank your body, each part and as a whole, for being thing wonderful physical form that allows you to run through fields, up hills, around a track, and discover new places the potential inside of you. Thank you body!

The last thing I want you to do is imagine yourself on your next run or your next race. I want you to feel you body, your body just as it is now, running strong, smooth, fast over the route or course. Feel your feet pushing off the ground, activating the muscles in your calves. Your powerful thighs pushing you forward. Your glutes activated each stride. You core strong holding good form. Your arms pumping fast, making your legs keep cadence with their swing. Your heart pounding and willing you forward. Your shoulders, neck, and head all at ease, not wasting energy but staying focused on what is in front of you. Your body in AMAZING. No one will ever be able to change that. This powerhouse is yours, and you get to decide what you can and can not do with it.

As we end, take a few more deep breaths then gently start wiggling your fingers and toes. Open your eyes and take a full body wake up stretch. Smile.

Additional Talking Points & Presenter Suggestions:

- When possible, ask questions rather than directly give information.
 - While we have not been able to find a concrete statistic on how many advertisements use photoshopped images of models, we have heard it being as high as 90%.
 - Another thing you may want to note is that when we see pictures of professional female runners, we often see pictures of them when they are at one of their goal races and in top shape. This is not how they look throughout the year.* Furthermore, the picture used is often one from hundreds of photos.
 - You MUST say the word period. The more you say period the better. We've got to destigmatize a women's period, which is not how most of us (the adults reading this) grew up. Throw in "menstrual cycle" too. You must be comfortable saying it so the girls can be comfortable saying it too, especially if they have male coaches who are uncomfortable saying period. Period. Got it? Okay.
 - Health indicators: Again, BMI is a poor indicator of health and elite athletes can appear to be above the healthy range because of their muscle mass. Better indicators of health can be found from blood samples, looking at cholesterol levels, blood sugar, blood pressure, etc.
 - Weightloss does not have a direct correlation to faster times!*
 - In terms of injury among female athletes in general, studies are now proving that doing a simple warm-up routine can be an effective way to prevent injuries common among female athletes. An in depth look at the topic is beyond the scope of this resource, but we suggest doing some review on your own:
<https://www.acc.co.nz/newsroom/stories/young-women-in-sport-are-we-training-them-all-wrong?fbclid=IwAR3fgNA93oR3QjiYlwh0liimlvHDMfgjXyKATL9sPmnLYaNCQA48CPMHhKY> (Article with additional information on training specifics for young women.)
<https://nfhslearn.com/courses/61163/acl-injury-prevention> (Course for coaches/trainers/parents on ACL prevention)
- If you do have extra time in the workshop, you can go over some warm-ups or post run activities like stretching or foam rolling, which are also good ways to practice gratitude for what one's body is capable of, and thanking it for the work put in.
- If there's extra time, the following videos may be helpful to share, but know your audience. The videos are emotional and discuss the determinants of weight loss in detail.) Another option is to have the girls read aloud Lauren Fleshman's popular essay "Dear Younger Me".
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qBwtCf2X5jw> (Mary Cain video discussing the body shaming she experienced while running for the Nike Oregon Project)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f2c3F8S7aXw> (The Weight of Mountains- Altra Female Runners)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PZaylyoRvlo> (Gwen Jorgenson on periods and performance)

<https://www.milesplit.com/articles/211759/dear-younger-me-lauren-fleshman> (Dear Younger Me: Lauren Fleshman)

*Sure, we could give more detailed studies of being a specific weight and performance, but honestly, we haven't found any good reason for this topic to even be broached among young athletes.

Note to Facilitators: It's okay if you do not have a perfect body image. It is better to be honest than to lie, especially as vulnerability will make you more relatable to the girls, even if you don't disclose your own challenges. They know. The important thing is that you are working on it, and working to change the norm.

Additional Resources for Coaches, Trainers, Workshop Facilitators and Parents

NEDA 1 Page Facts <https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/athletes-eating-disorders>

NEDA Athlete Workbook

<https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/sites/default/files/nedaw18/3.%20CoachandTrainerToolkit%20-%20Copy.pdf>

Podcasts:

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/212-lauren-fleshman-dr-melody-moore-on-changing-eating/id672719168?i=1000373039356>

<https://tinamuir.com/renee-mcgregor/>

*Both the podcast start the conversation by talking about female athletes, but later go on to acknowledge the challenges male athletes face as well.

Recommended Reading: What Made Maddy Run? The Secret Struggles and Tragic Death of an All-American Teen

(Not body specific, but goes into detail about mental health and the pressures of current student athletes in high school and college)

*After years of research, these are some of the top resources we've found for discussing body image and eating challenges among young athletes. However, there are many more wonderful articles, videos, and websites out there that give more information on this topic, as well as personal stories of athletes overcoming these obstacles.

Parents, Families, & Communities

We want to acknowledge that body image and eating challenges among young women is not a secular issue. Ideals on beauty, body image, and food run deep on societal, cultural, and family levels. While this guide and workshop is intended to educate the young female runner, ignoring the impact of other influences in their lives would be negligent on our part.

One thing anyone reading this can do, and encourage others to do, is vote with their dollar. A large reason that we decided to come out with this guide now is because of elite female athletes who ran for Nike's Oregon Project have been brave enough to share their stories on how they were body shamed by their coach. While we hope Nike will make changes in their company, what we can do at this moment is research and purchase from companies who promote a positive body image. Additionally, we need to encourage others to check both their self-talk and how they talk about others. Girls are always watching and listening, so it is important we all model positive self talk and health eating habits.

For facilitators, we encourage you to talk or email the parents/guardians of the female runners you speak to. Most of us have stories on how our own families handled the topic of food and body, often in a detrimental way. However, the important thing is to acknowledge that all parents/guardians are doing their best with the tools they have, and are often acting on values from their own families and the messages they've received from society. If you choose to speak to parents/guardians, feel free to mention anything that you have found useful above, such signs to look for and BMI being a poor indicator of health. In addition, the following articles/links may be useful resources to share:

<https://www.thejournal.ie/readme/cut-the-fat-talk-in-front-of-kids-1258255-Jan2014/>

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/27270419>

Additionally, some parents are just unaware of the pressures young women feel to please coaches and others who expect them to look a certain way and perform well. For that reason, it may also be helpful to include the Mary Cain video we shared above.

A final note to facilitators:

Thank you! This is important and needed work. As I (Ray) have done the research for putting this guide together, I have talked to countless women on their body and eating challenges and heard stories from their high school and college running days. Most recently, I had a woman share with me that she had three girls with eating disorders on her high school cross country team! It made me sick, angry, and sad to hear that, despite my knowledge on the statistics of eating disorders. Almost all the women thanked me for putting this together, but the thanks really goes to all of you for taking the time to read through this information and share the knowledge with your communities.

I know presenting is uncomfortable for many people, but don't worry about being perfect. Girls need role models of woman okay with not being perfect. And remember, you've got a whole team of women rooting for you!

Remember, you are amazing. You got this!

With much gratitude,

Ray

Contributors:

We've had several friends review this guide and workshop, make edits, and share ideas. We sincerely thank the following people for helping us with the final product: Ali Hummelberg, Alex Harris, Pamela Kropf, Roseann Peiffer, Terry Chiplin.