



ARTIST LISA YUSKAVAGE, FAMED FOR HER PROVOCATIVE PORTRAITS OF THE FEMALE BODY, HAS SAID, "SELF-DEPRECIATION IS SO COMMON WITH WOMEN ... HOW MANY WOMEN DO YOU KNOW THAT LOVE THEIR BODIES OPENLY? THEY DON'T." ABOVE, YUSKAVAGE'S *LITTLE NIGHT*, 1999.

Simmons, Rachel. "Body Bashing." *Teen Vogue* (June/July 2012): 98-101.

body bashing

**Obsessing over your flaws and trashing your figure with friends might seem harmless, but the consequences could be serious. Rachel Simmons reports.
Artwork by Lisa Yuskavage.**

As a high school freshman, Elizabeth was the kind of person who stopped others from beating themselves up. Then one day, she realized that she was no longer the skinniest one in her group. A friend—who was the same size as her—complained about her own legs. Another said she hated her stomach. Elizabeth panicked. “After hearing them say that there were things wrong with them, I began thinking, Maybe I need to focus on these parts of my body too,” recalls the now-eighteen-year-old.

Soon afterward, Elizabeth crash dieted, lost several pounds, and was showered with compliments from her friends over how thin she was. They’d tear apart their own bodies and then obsess over Elizabeth’s newly slim physique. “The fact that they noticed I was getting thinner made me feel good about myself,” she recalls. As she grew more dependent on others’ feedback, she got dangerously skinny. “I felt competitive, like I had to be smaller,” she remembers. “I craved the attention. It was like an accomplishment: If people were noticing you were too small, that was a good thing.” Her weight

plummeted, and she was eventually hospitalized with anorexia. “All I thought about was my body. I didn’t laugh or smile anymore,” she says.

In the United States, where almost 60 percent of teen girls are trying to lose weight and anorexia is the third most common chronic illness among adolescents, constant self-criticism and body comparison can easily spin out of control, girls say. The behavior can frequently start as a way for someone who’s worried about her weight to get support from others. “You want to hear your friend say, ‘No, you’re not fat at all!’” says Daria*, seventeen, who confesses that she and her friends rarely make it through a conversation without criticizing their physical appearance. But engaging in “fat talk,” or comments that support thinness as the ideal body type, increases body dissatisfaction, notes Carolyn Becker, Ph.D., professor of psychology at Trinity University in San Antonio. According to Becker, one study found that just three to five minutes of fat talk left young women feeling increased body dissatisfaction. “Hating your body has become so normal for girls that body bashing is now part of their everyday conversation,” says Catherine Steiner-Adair, ➤

“THERE ARE SO MANY OTHER THINGS TO TALK ABOUT— WHY DO WE HAVE TO TALK ABOUT OUR BODIES ALL THE TIME?”
—Alejandra, 21

Ed.D., associate psychologist and director of Eating Disorders Education and Prevention at McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts, and clinical instructor in the department of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. Courtney E. Martin, author of *Perfect Girls, Starving Daughters* (Berkley Trade), agrees: “It creates this ugly cycle where friends—who are supposed to support each other—end up reinforcing the worst of how we feel about ourselves. It’s like we’re all in this pact of self-hate together,” she says.

Indeed, body bashing often turns into a contagious group activity, gossip that brings girls together over a common interest. Just like a bunch of guys might create an instant friendship around a sports team they love, girls can complain about their bodies as a way to bond. If one person puts herself down, her friends feel like they have to do it too, or else they’ll be excluded or seem rude. “If someone’s like, ‘My butt is so big,’ then someone else has to jump in and say what’s bad about herself,” explains Blaine, 21. “When I sit on the sidelines, I’m left out of the conversation.”

And it can be addictive. “Once you’re used to hearing people tell you that you look good, you want it again and again,” says Blaine. Some girls engage in body bashing to control the gossip about themselves. “I’ll just say stuff about myself before someone else gets the chance to think it and judge me,” shares 21-year-old Alejandra. Interestingly, body bashing can also be used to express a range of difficult feelings that may have very little to do with weight, according to Steiner-Adair. “It could be that the girl found out she wasn’t invited to a party, or she saw someone else getting more attention. The way girls articulate that they’re feeling insecure about something is to say, ‘Is my butt too big? Am I fat?’ hoping for reassurance,” she says. Olivia, eighteen, explains, “A girl might post a picture of herself on Facebook that she doesn’t like with a joking comment such as ‘I look disgusting in this photo’ and put in a ‘ha-ha.’” Invariably, a flood of comments telling her that she looks beautiful will arrive from her friends.

However, body bashing isn’t always a bonding experience. In fact, it can just as quickly lead to unspoken resentment and mistrust between friends. Alejandra, who is one of the biggest girls in her group, says, “Hearing my friends make comments about their own bodies makes me turn around and say in my head, ‘If you think you’re fat, look at me—what do you think I am?’”

Since staying silent during a body-bashing session can make you look rude, it’s possible that girls may offer positive comments even if they don’t mean them, which can breed suspicion. Says Alejandra, “Compliments never really feel honest. Your friend is never going to tell you, ‘Yeah, your butt really *does* look kind of big.’” Furthermore, body bashing puts girls in competition with one another, albeit indirectly: By putting yourself down, you can earn compliments from others without seeming conceited. “While boys can get competitive about their bodies too—like who’s in better shape—girls seem to do a lot more comparing and competing about their looks: who’s got better hair, who’s got longer legs, who’s developing too much, and who’s not developing at all,” says Steiner-Adair.

A number of factors played into nineteen-year-old Hannah’s eating disorder. “I wanted to be a perfect student, and I was still grieving my dad’s passing away—combined with comparing myself to others,” she notes. It all began when she was fourteen and her best friend started thinking more closely about calories and exercise. Hannah felt threatened. “I was afraid that if people around me started working out, they would be thinner than me,” recalls Hannah, who began restricting food and overexercising and became anorexic. Even

“My friends would tell me I looked good, but I wouldn’t fully believe what they said. Girls just say what you want to hear

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—Daria, 17

“

I didn't want the people around me to be thinner than me. I always compared myself to others

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—Hannah, 19

as she stopped getting her period and started losing her hair, she was still determined to work out more, track her calories, and eat less than the girls around her did. No matter how thin she became, she could see only the worst of her own body. “I would zero in on a specific part and constantly look at that in front of the mirror,” she says. At that point, her friends’ comforting comments no longer mattered. “When you always berate yourself in front of the mirror, that becomes your truth. It’s hard to change that when you’re so used to looking for the same problem over and over again.”

If you’re superfixated on a certain body part, it could be a sign of body dysmorphic disorder. BDD sufferers, who make up about 1 to 2 percent of the population, put enormous value on that body part and experience shame and fear over it, causing them to withdraw from the activities and people they enjoy. “Their identity is attached to the body part,” explains Arie Winograd, director of the Los Angeles Body Dysmorphic Disorder & Body Image Clinic. “If you have that type of relationship with a body part, there’s no room to have a relationship with a human being.”

Experts say there are concrete ways you can begin to kick the body-bashing habit before it gets out of hand. Becker, who codeveloped a national body image improvement program called Reflections, suggests making a pact with friends to stop trashing your appearance. Enact a fat-talk-free day, and encourage everyone to change the way they speak to themselves. “Stand in front of the mirror and practice saying only positive things about yourself, physically

and emotionally,” Becker says. Also, focus on what your body allows you to do rather than how it looks. “Tell yourself, I like my legs because they let me run and dance and walk. I like my arms because they let me lift and hug,” she explains.

Even though Alejandra resents her friends’ body bashing, she knows that part of the responsibility to change the behavior lies with her. “It has to start with me not bringing it up, and it can’t be the only thing we talk about,” she says. If you want to help a friend who body bashes habitually, Martin advises responding with comments that highlight her positive inner qualities, like her generosity or sense of humor. “Give her some different ways to see herself through you,” she says. Daria agrees, saying, “If you have a friend who puts a positive spin on everything, it can end up making you feel better about yourself.”

Now a college sophomore, Hannah has recovered from her eating disorder through a combination of therapy, mindful activities like yoga and meditation, support from her family, and working on body image projects during high school. “Opening up about my issues helped me feel empowered to get better for myself,” she says. She’s working hard to be a role model for younger girls as well. When two tween girls she used to babysit began criticizing their bodies after eating ice cream, Hannah told them her story. “It was a great way for them to understand the dangers of body bashing,” she says. Elizabeth, who is currently recovering from anorexia through therapy and meal planning, doesn’t let her friends body bash around her anymore, and she tries to see the best of herself in the mirror. “It’s about changing your mind-set. If you believe that you love your body, you will,” she says. “People think body bashing is just making harmless comments, but there may be a girl who’s really insecure, and a few words here and there could send her over the edge.” □

**Name has been changed.*

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LOSING WEIGHT WAS AN ACCOMPLISHMENT FOR ME.

I BEGAN TO CRAVE THE ATTENTION AND PEOPLE NOTICING

HOW MUCH WEIGHT I LOST

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—Elizabeth, 18