

# Girl, look at that body: Can changing who we look at help our body image?

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Credit: Dr Ian Stephen

New research has found that instructing people to pay attention to large or thin bodies can influence their body image, and may provide hope for new treatments for people with body image problems.

The researchers previously discovered that people who are dissatisfied with their bodies naturally tend to look at thin bodies more than large bodies, and that this can contribute to their perception of thin bodies as 'normal'.

This study, published in the *International Journal of Eating Disorders* was based on the idea that it might be possible to use this knowledge to deliberately change the [body size](#) that [young women](#) perceive as normal. "We think that we can," said Dr. Ian Stephen, who led the study. "This study suggests that training people to fixate on a more representative set of bodies might reverse their [body](#) size misperception and reduce their [body image](#) problems."

The researchers used an app that allowed participants to choose the body size that they consider normal. They then showed the participants pictures of large and thin bodies at the same time, and asked them to pay attention to the bodies wearing blue or yellow clothing, which corresponded with large or thin bodies.

The participants then chose the body size they considered most normal again.

"We found that the participants who had been asked to look at the thin bodies showed a change in the body size they perceived as normal after just two minutes of exposure: the bodies they thought were most normal were significantly thinner than before," said Katie Hunter, the student who ran the study. "It was vice versa for those who looked at the larger bodies. They perceived a significantly larger body as being normal than they did before the exposure."

While this research is still in its early stages, the team hope that their findings can be used to develop new treatments for people with body image problems or eating disorders.

"While trials haven't been completed on this yet, we think that it has real potential for developing into a clinical treatment," said Associate Professor Kevin Brooks, co-author of the study.

"The question is whether we can use this knowledge to train people with body misperception – people who see their body as larger or smaller than it really is – to pay attention to a more diverse range of bodies, and thus 'correct' their perception of body size," concluded Dr. Stephen.

**More information:** Ian D. Stephen et al. Experimental manipulation of visual attention affects body size adaptation but not body dissatisfaction, *International Journal of Eating Disorders* (2018). [DOI: 10.1002/eat.22976](https://doi.org/10.1002/eat.22976)

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