

Teen Mentor Focus Group Meeting

February 19, 2011

Harris Center at MGH

On a Saturday morning, five teenage girls (ranging from seventh grade to high school senior) from five different public and private schools in Massachusetts met with Heather Thompson-Brenner, Ph.D., and Kamryn Eddy, Ph.D., at the Harris Center. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the girls' perspective on pressures in their communities that lead to poor body image and eating disorders, and to brainstorm about how they might collaborate with the Harris Center to develop outreach or advocacy initiatives addressing these issues. We paid particular attention to the girls' upcoming attendance at the activities of the Harris Center Annual Forum on March 8th, at which the girls will attend a private panel discussion with Miss America 2011 Teresa Scanlan (herself just 17 years old when she became Miss America last month), as well as Miss America 2008 Kirsten Haglund, both of whom chose eating disorders awareness and advocacy as their Miss America platforms.

During the meeting, the five Teen Mentors prepared themselves to ask these women questions, as well to share their own perspectives with these public figures in order to better inform their advocacy work. They also became prepared to meet Diane von Furstenberg, the main speaker at the Harris Center Annual Forum, and to understand her particular message about women's empowerment.

At the meeting, the girls raised a number of very important points that could improve education and advocacy work, both through the Forum activities and beyond. Here are some of the points of our discussion.

- Body image pressures can come from other girls as well as boys, and bullying and teasing are important issues to address in conjunction with eating disorders for young people.
- Pressure to achieve at the highest levels, which comes from the self, family, and the communities we live in, are important aspects of the stress that girls express through body image concerns and eating issues
- Girls have a tendency to discount the positive and to focus on the negative in messages they receive: A movement like "Accept a Compliment" week might be a catchy idea to help girls let in the nice things that other people say and feel about them.
- The changes in the Miss America focus--with a clear emphasis now on scholarship and achievement in multiple areas--seem like good developments, but would a larger person ever be crowned Miss America? Does it make sense to include swimsuit and evening gown competitions in this day and age, especially in the context of our appreciation of the importance of eating disorders?
- Girls and young women can get sad and stressed about many things, and may express many other issues through eating symptoms. It is important to reach out to girls and young women to offer help for stress and sadness to prevent eating disorders down the

road.

- It is crucial to use social networking to reach young people in general, as well as to address eating issues and to make changes. The Teen Mentors were aware of a number of ways that social networking was being used negatively, and had ideas about how to launch counter-campaigns that would be more health promoting.

These are just a few examples of the excellent ideas that the Teen Mentors generated. The meeting itself was high-spirited and fun, and we all agreed that we are looking forward to the Harris Center Annual Forum on March 8th, and to reuniting afterward to talk about how it went and to make more plans.