

puberty blues

Empowering teenage girls to befriend their bodies

BY CAITLIN REID

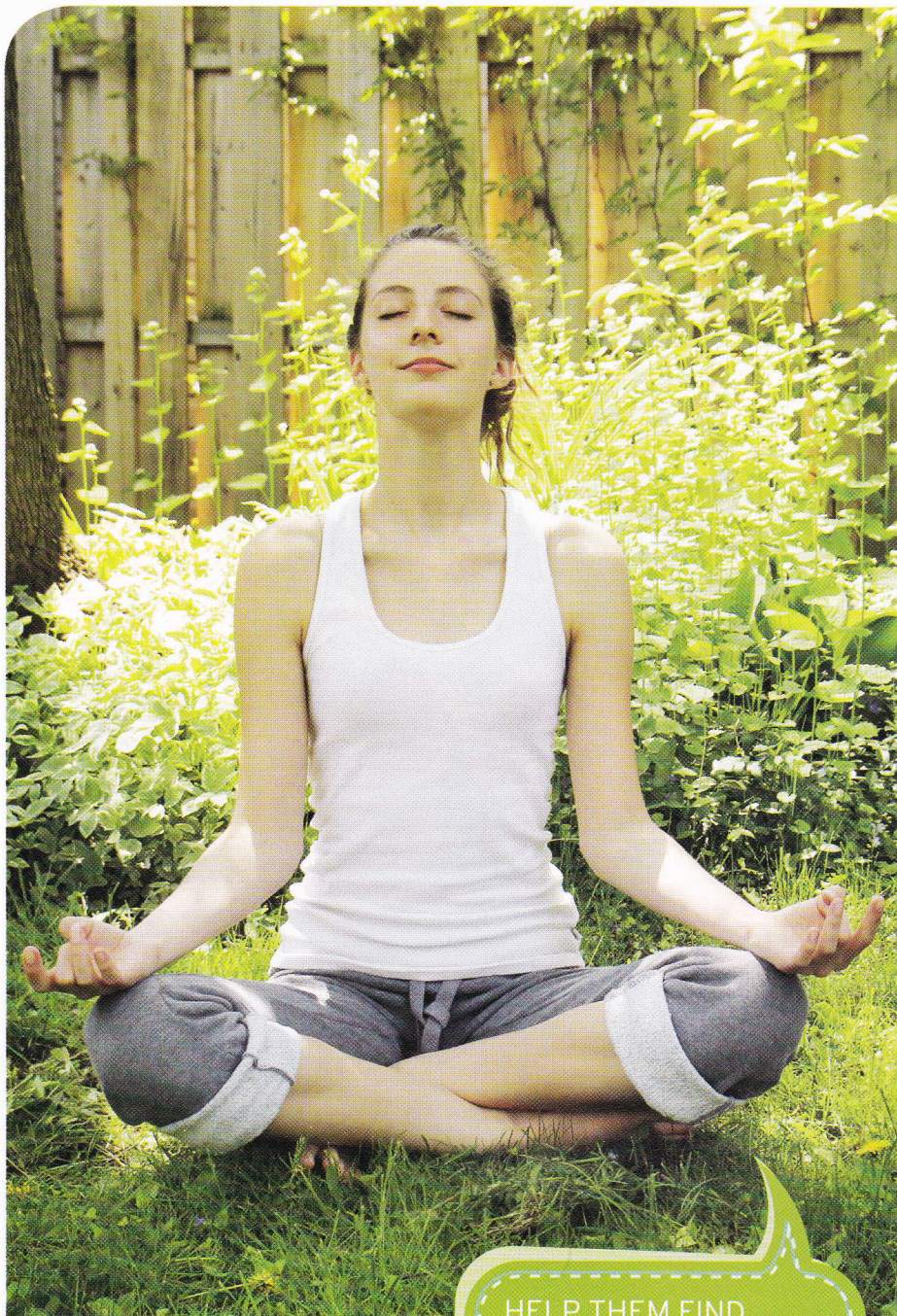
Being a teenage girl today is hard. Of course, all teenage girls – irrespective of era – have had to go through the onset of puberty, the emotional rollercoaster that is their menstrual cycle and the struggle to form their own identity. But never before have teenage girls been under as much pressure – pressure to fit in and conform to societal ideals which dictate that teenage girls must be beautiful, thin and stylish. With unrealistic images of rake-thin celebrities and models splashed throughout the media, “selfies” of peers and the competitive world of “likes” on Facebook and Instagram, there is little wonder that Mission Australia’s 2013 Youth Survey found body image is among the top three concerns for teenage girls.

Sadly, we live in a world that teaches girls to judge their self-worth on looks rather than ability. As children, girls focus and marvel at what their body can do. According to clinical psychologist Dr Robin Goodman, who specialises in children, girls’ self-esteem peaks at nine years of age, then takes “a nose dive”.

As girls approach their teenage years, their focus on function soon shifts to form thanks to cultural standards that objectify women and focus solely on their aesthetic qualities. Teen girls soon learn to use their appearance and weight to assess their self-worth.

Airbrushed images of women in magazines evoke ideals to girls that are often unattainable and unhealthy. When teenage girls buy into this unattainable world of supposed perfection, their self-confidence and resilience takes a hit. A recent international study of 3300 girls and women from Brazil, Canada, China, Germany, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, the UK and the US found that 90 per cent of girls aged 15 to 17 years of age want to change at least one aspect of their physical appearance, with bodyweight ranking the highest. >>





Tips for yoga with teenage girls

HELP THEM RELAX

Encourage girls to express any fears they have before class so that they can understand they aren't different - that many other girls experience the same thing.

ADDRESS FAILURE

Discuss an asana as a journey and that being unable to complete a pose is the start of the journey, while falling out is a simple part of the process and not a failure.

HELP THEM FIND STILLNESS

Teenage girls have busy minds, so help them find stillness by being present and focusing on their breath.

MAKE A CONNECTION

Explain why they're holding a particular pose so they can understand and feel the benefits of being in it.

» Teenage girls who are feeling dissatisfied with their bodies are more likely to adopt unhealthy behaviours such as dieting. In fact, the majority of teenage girls diet at some stage in their lives, even if they're at a healthy weight. According to a 2007 report from the Australian Childhood Foundation, dieting before the age of 15 or frequent bouts of dieting are both associated with poorer physical and mental health, more disordered eating, extreme body dissatisfaction and more frequent general health problems. To improve body image in teenage girls we need to change their focus from form to function. But this is where the first hurdle arises.

ACTIVITY LEVELS IN TEENS

The Australian Bureau of Statistics has found that participation rates of girls in sport peak between the ages of nine and 11, and begin to decrease from the age of 12.

"Between the ages of 14-18 years we see participation rates of girls in sport decrease," says physical education teacher and yoga teacher Chloe Thorogood. Teenage girls drop out of sport because they're self-conscious or uncomfortable with their body, lack confidence in their physical abilities or feel "unfeminine" playing sport. "Many teenage girls are also inactive because they don't like the sporting outfits they're forced to wear or dislike getting all hot and sweaty," Thorogood adds. "We're then left with a huge number of teenage girls who aren't physically active."

A lack of confidence in an ability to perform physical tasks may then lead teenage girls to avoid situations that could expose their perceived lack of competence. But ironically, a Sport and Recreation Queensland report revealed that girls who are physically active report a higher degree of body satisfaction than those who aren't active. The report states: "This high degree of self-acceptance comes from the knowledge that their bodies are strong and competent, combined

with the satisfaction they feel from overcoming challenges." Combined, this can empower teenage girls to positively engage with their bodies. So how do we convince inactive teenage girls to get active? "Introduce them to yoga!" suggests Thorogood.

TEEN GIRLS AND YOGA

Before a girl even steps onto a yoga mat, yoga can offer a reprieve from being judged on appearance. Unlike most female sports, yoga doesn't require any tight or revealing outfit – you can wear whatever you feel comfortable in.

Once on the mat, yoga enables a girl to establish a non-verbal and direct relationship with her body. According to yoga teacher and positive body image advocate Sarah Ball, "This non-verbal experience of being inside her own body is often among the first opportunities teenage girls have to experience themselves from within rather than perceiving themselves based on external measurements, reflections or peer perceptions".

Ball, who promotes positive body image with women of all ages, believes "this shift into the enjoyment of the body from within is fundamental to the benefit of yoga for teenage girls". This feeling helps girls experience self-worth and being comfortable in their own skin. With less time spent on self-loathing and destructive behaviours, a girl can then direct her energy towards focusing on her creativity and passions in life.

A teenage girl's positive attitudes and beliefs are further enhanced by the physical competence yoga promotes. Accomplishing a new pose or feeling strength develop from week to week can enhance confidence in physical abilities. For some girls, this may be the first time she experiences her own body strength and discovers just how capable she is.

The alignment principles of yoga, such as lengthening through the crown of the head and drawing the navel to the spine, can also help girls build better posture, particularly if they have developed hunched shoulders from being self-conscious of their developing breasts. Opening up the heart centre



"Yoga can teach teens to work kindly with their body"

Befriend Your Body: the program

Chloe Thorogood and Sarah Ball are developing and delivering a yoga-based program designed to support and empower positive self-image in teenage girls aged 14-17 years in the Byron Bay Shire. Befriend Your Body is an eight-week yoga program supported by the local council and the Byron Youth Service.

The program is designed to create a safe space for teenagers to explore, challenge and choose their response to societal perceptions around body image. It's all about educating and empowering teenagers to make positive choices for themselves, while also providing them with the tools for self-care. These self-care practices are developed from yoga principles, simple breathing techniques, journaling and creative expression. The program also aims to create a network of informed teenagers who will support each other in establishing and maintaining positive attitudes towards body image, which can then be promoted throughout the wider community. To get involved in the Befriend Your Body program or for more info, visit sarahball.com.au.

and strengthening through the spine physically, mentally and emotionally can help girls stand tall with confidence.

Thorogood and Ball have both seen this development of confidence firsthand. "It's very gratifying working with teenage girls and seeing the joy that emerges when they realise they really do have a choice in how they feel about their body and the kind of woman they wish to be in the world," says Ball.

Through the asanas, yoga can teach teens to work kindly with their body, while the breathing techniques and meditation can encourage them to work to a place of stillness, which is something so many teenagers need – irrespective of gender. "We live in an environment that is constantly 'on'," says Thorogood. "Mobile phones and social media are overstimulating our teens and making it hard for them to be completely present. There are no devices in yoga sessions, so teens can work to a place of stillness, become present and enjoy the moment."

Focusing on breathing and the sounds inside and outside of the room, along with becoming aware of the physical sensation of stretching, offers girls a natural way to find relief from daily stressors. According to Thorogood, "The simple act of instructing girls to breathe and noticing how it feels when they let the breath go offers them a fantastic way to relax." It's not just about relaxing from day-to-day stress either. "Yoga offers teenage girls the chance to really relax from the pressure to 'be someone' and instead, to simply be themselves," says Ball. ❀

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