

WELLBEING

Good Thinking

Low self-esteem and poor body image, responsible for mental health issues such as self-harming and eating disorders, are affecting a growing number of young people. Now, a team of women is making a positive change

In a world in which we have access to other people's thoughts and feelings every hour of every day thanks to social media, it's easy to compare your life to those of your Facebook friends and find it wanting. Similarly, most of us have seen pictures of famous people then looked at our own reflection in the mirror and felt bad about our appearance.

Sadly, self-esteem issues are all too common and they're affecting girls and, increasingly, boys at an ever younger age, which is cause for concern. While as adults we may be able to shrug off feelings of inadequacy and realise that everyone has good days and bad days, with young people poor self-esteem can manifest itself as extreme shyness or being distant, aloof and moody.

More worrying still, it can lead to eating disorders, bullying, self-harm, drug and alcohol abuse and even suicide.

According to research by the Mental Health Foundation in 2006, between one in 12 and one in 15 children and young people self-harm. And according to the Government's Health and Social Care Information Centre, in the year to October 2013 there was an 8% increase in the numbers of young people being admitted to hospital because of eating disorders, with 15 the most common age of admission for girls and 13 for boys.

Faced with these statistics, three women have decided it's time to turn the tide.

Natasha Devon, Grace Barrett and Nadia Mendoza, collectively known as the Self-Esteem Team, are challenging stereotypes, reducing stigma around mental health and educating young people on self-esteem by visiting schools up and down the country to spread the word.

"Between us, we know what it's like to have an eating disorder, to be bullied, to be picked on and to self-harm," says Natasha, a former model who had an eating disorder and depression before forging a career as a journalist.



(From left) Grace Barrett, Natasha Devon and Nadia Mendoza – the Self-Esteem Team – visit schools on their mission to help teenagers value themselves

"I was a model for three years but battled with an eating disorder for eight years, so it profoundly affected me. After I got better I wanted to go into schools with pragmatic, non-patronising advice that could help people just like me."

Now a singer and dancer, Grace grew up in a rural village in the Midlands, where she suffered from extreme eczema that made her hair fall out and was one of the few mixed-race children at school. "I looked very different and was picked on," she says.

Showbiz journalist Nadia also had a bad time at school. "I was painfully shy, didn't fit in or have any confidence and was bullied, so I started to self-harm when I was just 11. It took me more than two decades to get through that – right through university, even my first job."

All of them not only understand what it's like to experience poor self-esteem, but are also proof that these problems can be overcome and that they should not characterise your adulthood.

"The Self-Esteem Team want to get the message out that women shouldn't be defined by their weight or their looks, but by their personalities," says Natasha.

What makes them so effective is their approach. "It's not about what you can't do – not about being told not to wear make-up or anything like that. It's about teaching young women to think for themselves, to question what they say and do and how they value themselves and their friends."

Perfect pressure

We are all affected by the media, by Twitter, Instagram and Facebook and by advertising and TV. We are bombarded with images telling us that if we were busier, prettier, younger, slimmer, more successful or richer, then we would be happier. But it seems that the constant pressure to be perfect is having the opposite effect, instead making us stressed and damaging our self-esteem.

"Society only really appears to value beauty and wealth," says Grace. "It doesn't seem to value happiness, well-rounded personalities, the ability to be funny, hold a great conversation and be kind and generous. Teenagers need to be told that those things are the more important and possible aims to achieve in life."

To ensure the message reaches even more teenagers, Natasha is also targeting teachers, parents and carers and has written a guide aimed at helping them boost the self-esteem of the

'Society doesn't seem to value happiness, well-rounded personalities, the ability to be funny, hold a great conversation and be kind and generous. These things are the possible aims to achieve in life'

pupils and children in their care. "I like to think of self-esteem as confidence," she explains. "But the truth is, it takes practice to be confident. We're all frightened of doing something new – learning to drive, speaking in public for the first time, going for an interview – and only by practising will you get better at it and gain confidence and self-esteem.

"A lack of self-esteem is not a 'lack' at all – it is giving into that negative inner voice that says, 'You can't do this; you're not good enough.' The art of self-esteem is to replace that negative voice with a positive one that says, 'Go for it!'"

For Grace, Nadia and Natasha, positive self-affirmation is key. A technique used in Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), a type of psychotherapy, is the idea that by actively repeating good things about yourself, in time you will start to believe what you say. "We try to teach young women to think for themselves, to question why they have negative thoughts, why we all judge each other by looks and how, often, the negative way we see ourselves is not accurate at all," says Natasha.

"When you look in the mirror, you lose the ability to see yourself objectively. And that can impact on how you stand, speak, the way you are with other people, what you think you deserve, the decisions you make in life and what you want from a relationship."

By developing certain good habits it is possible to stop the negative spiral and to boost self-esteem. According to Natasha, it is vital that we teach young people not only to question what they see and read on social media and in advertising and on TV, but also to rethink the way they interact with one another.

"When we say things like, 'Oh, have you lost weight? You look great,' or, 'I love your handbag,' it says that we value someone because they are thin or rich and that's not why we are friends with people – it's because we like their personality. That's an important message to get across."

The team also believes that viewing social media as the enemy is a mistake and they actively encourage interaction via their Twitter and Facebook pages.

"Social media means that it's hard for young women to switch off, to sit and think and digest anything they have been exposed to. It's a constant barrage that doesn't give you the time to

SELF-HELP HEROINES

(Clockwise from below left) Lena Dunham, Lily Allen, Jennifer Lawrence and Lupita Nyong'O have all dealt with self-esteem issues in the glare of the public spotlight



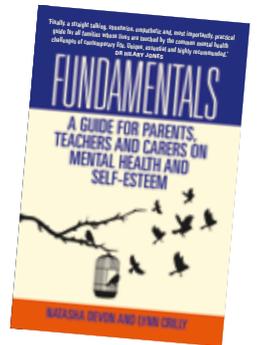
assess everything and one thing we recommend is for parents to try to set a limit on the time their children are exposed to it," says Natasha.

"That said, there are some incredibly positive role models out there for young women – people like Lena Dunham, Lupita Nyong'O, Lily Allen, Demi Lovato and Jennifer Lawrence. They are feisty and honest and open about their self-esteem issues and their struggles.

"They are young women who have found a voice and that's an inspiration for women of all ages."

To find out more about the Self-Esteem Team, visit selfesteemteam.org or follow them on Twitter @SelfEsteemTeam.

• *Fundamentals: A Guide for Parents, Teachers and Carers on Mental Health and Self-Esteem* by Natasha Devon and Lynn Crilly is published by John Blake, priced £9.99.



HEALTH NOTES



➤ **Sleeping Beauty** / *I want to Sleep* (£8.99; Harriet Gidley) is a practical guide to improving the quality of your sleep, the time spent sleeping and how refreshed you feel in the morning. It argues that little changes to your lifestyle, home and bedroom can make a big difference to your health.



➤ **Juicy news** A study in the US has shown that pure fruit juice does not cause tooth decay. One in four five-year-olds in the UK suffers from visible tooth decay. Dr Nigel Carter, chief executive of the British Dental Health Foundation, says: "Parents should look for 100% fruit juices – these differ from juice drinks."



➤ **Hunger Games** Fed up with your everyday gym and exercise class? If so and you live in London, take a look at the team games fitness site joinrabble.com and instead try dodgeball, tag rugby and, best of all, The Hunger Games. Who doesn't want to be fit like Katniss Everdeen?

**REPRO: REMOVE LOGOS
FROM BG OF CELEB SHOTS
ON LEFT**